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The monstrous cities orbiting overhead mocked the earthbound humans. Hobie wanted to reach out there and pull one down and smash it.

BABYLON IN



Illustrated
by BIRMINGHAM

By EDMOND HAMILTON

THE SKY

SAM MACKLIN walked through between the parked cars. Hobie came behind him, tall, gangling, and proud.

"There's a big crowd, Pa."

"Well, it's been a hot day, over a hundred. Maybe they come to get cool."

"No, sir, they come to hear you. They always come to hear you."

"They do seem to, for a fact."

Sam Macklin nodded his head and smiled. "Guess if you tell 'em what they want to hear, they'll come to hear it. And Hobie, I ain't going to send 'em home empty."

The cars up in front had their lights on so that the blunt bare tip of the headland was like a stage, with the black sky over it and the dark Pacific beyond it for a backdrop. People were sitting on the rocks, on the patches of coarse grass, on the roofs and hoods and fenders of the cars. Somebody said, "Here he is, here's Sam!" The crowd began to yell. "Hey Sam, give 'em hell, Sam, we're with you, Sam." Macklin was swallowed up in a mass of welcoming arms and patting hands. Hobie lost him but he was used to that and didn't mind. It was part of the pride. He made his way around behind the jostling backs, feeling a queer tight thrill in him at the sound of the women's voices, the way they screamed *Sam! Sam!* into the

cool sea wind. Pretty soon he could see his father again. He was waving and chaffering with the crowd. He wore a white shirt that set off his brown, sinewed arms and long powerful neck. He was a rangy man, gaunt-faced, with a big nose and jaw and blue eyes that looked as though they could pierce through steel. He turned toward the crowd and they melted back until he was standing by himself on the narrow end of the headland, with the lights on him and nothing but the black night beyond. Hobie found a rock and sat on it, one long leg hanging straight over the drop, a hundred feet down to where pale surf breathed on a little beach.

THE crowd fell quiet. Hobie bit his hand, shivering.

"Now," said Macklin quietly, "you all know what I come to talk about." His voice was harsh and deep and far-carrying. Those in the farthest ends of the crowd heard and answered. "I always talk about the same thing, because it seems to me there ain't anything else important in the world to talk about, and that's us—you and me, our wives and families, and what's becoming of us, and why."

Again the crowd growled and muttered.

"This ain't the first time in history," said Sam Macklin, "that men have forsook justice and

gone following after strange gods and left the righteous behind to suffer, until . . ." He paused, and there was an indrawn breath, and somewhere a seabird cried. Macklin leaned forward, as though to make his oneness with the crowd more definite. "Until, my friends, they're pulled down from their high place, and trampled, and then in that day the righteous are succored and lifted up."

Hobie watched the crowd. It was like they were one body, a lot of arms and legs but only one body, and no head. His father was the head. His father was the voice, speaking for all of them. Hobie could see their faces in the headlights, and it seemed they were watching their own thoughts come out of Sam Macklin's mouth, and stand before them clearer and sharper than they had ever seen them before.

"They moved on," Macklin was saying. "They builded them cities, not on the good solid Earth because that wasn't good enough for them any longer, but right up in heaven, to fly back and forth with their mocking luxuries and fornications. . . ."

And even the names they gave the cities, Hobie thought, were mockeries too. Nineveh and Tyre. Valhalla. Carthage and Cibola and Camelot, Lyonesse and—Babylon.

". . . and Babylon. That great

city! But we were left behind. And why? Because we weren't good enough. Because we don't worship the right gods, the gods of the machines that can't make a mistake. Because we don't speak the right language and don't have a lot of fancy letters after our names. I know! I'm not Sam Macklin, Ph.D., or even Sam Macklin, A.B. I'm something better. I'm Sam Macklin, Human Being, and I'm proud of it . . ."

A roar went up from the crowd and the women shrilled. The soft sea wind lifted the hair on Hobie's head and set the roots of it to prickling. Now over one shoulder he cast a furtive glance at the dark sky.

". . . human beings, every one of us. And why have we been pushed aside like dirt, living on the crumbs they're good enough to throw us? Can you answer me that?"

"Tell us, Sam!"

"I'll tell you. It's because God only helps them that has the guts to help themselves. Like we're going to help ourselves, finally! We still got the ballot. We can still elect men to talk for us . . ."

"Sam! Sam! Sam!"

"That's up to you. But if it's me, or if it's somebody else, someday, no matter how long it takes us . . ."

He turned away from the crowd and stretched his head up and he seemed to grow tall

against the stars, taller than any human man. Hobie stopped breathing. There was a sudden hard silence.

In the middle of the silence Sam Macklin said aloud, "We won't never get our jobs back, we won't never be men again, until we do it, until we reach out up there with our hands . . ."

A star shot swift and brilliant out of the deep west.

". . . and pull you down!" Sam Macklin cried. "You, Babylon! You the great city! You up there mocking us! We'll pull you down—you and all your sister-cities!"

HIS hands reached high, grasping for the shooting star. Hobie thought for one reeling moment that he had caught it. But the star passed on, tantalizing, scornful, arrogant, leaving Sam Macklin and his son and all the others stranded on their promontory, howling their anger and their hurt. And the shame of that stranding was so great that Hobie wept with it, standing silent in the edge of the crowd, with the tears on his cheeks and his fists closed hard.

Then he ran. He stumbled into the car and sat alone, dazed and sick with the glitter of that man-made star.

After a while Sam Macklin got in and drove away.

"How long will it take, Pa?"

Hobie asked. "To pull them down."

Sam Macklin talked about elections and speeches and the making of laws.

Hobie said, "Too long."

The cool salt smell went out of the air. Dust came into it, the remains of the day's heat, the dry sweetness of sunburned grass. The car left the highway for a maze of dark streets that swirled around the curving sides of low hills. The pavement, endlessly patched, made the tires slap and jar. Hobie stared at the sky and did not speak.

* * *

The Macklin house was eighty-four years old. The ornamental plank front was painted blue, the stucco sides white, both of them bleached by sun and stained by winter rains, the stucco showing irregular blotches where repairs had been made. Inside there was a faint odor of decaying plaster. The floors had sunk. The pink ceramic tile in the bathroom was jagged all over with cracks, and in the kitchen the built-in oven tilted so that pans put into it all slid to one side. The TV had been cockeyed so long that now a level one looked strange to them.

Hobie went down the narrow hall to the room he shared with his two smaller brothers. Joanie Ann rated a room to herself because she was a girl and Hobie envied her, even though the con-

verted den wasn't much bigger than you needed to turn around in. It seemed like he never had a minute alone, a minute to just be quiet and think. Even now the kids were snoring and snuffling, making noise. Hobie did not feel like sleeping. There was a sickness in the pit of his stomach that would not let him rest. He lay on his bed for a few minutes and then he crept out again, clear outside into the patio at the back of the house. He sat in an old chair by the barbecue, and stared at the sky, and stared and trembled, and thought how his father's hands had reached up for the fleeing impudent star and seemed to catch it.

He saw quite clearly what he had to do. He had known, he guessed, for a long time, ever since he left school or even before that, but he hadn't been ready and so he had left the thought alone, to lie still and grow. Now he was ready.

HE did not take anything with him. There was nothing to take except his winter jacket and he was not going to need that. The little money he knew his mother had saved wouldn't help him even if he wanted to steal it, and he couldn't get it out of the back of the bureau drawer without waking her and Pa. All Hobie did was walk to the back door and put his hand on the wall beside it

for a minute. Then he went away.

He walked steadily, through the rest of the night and into the first light of morning. Just before the sun came up he saw the star again, travelling high and serene from west to east. He had been seeing it all his life. Some of the other cities were visible from time to time, but the orbit of Babylon was such that it was most often in the sky. Hobie watched it. "You robbed me," he whispered to it, with the intimacy of hate. As an afterthought he added, "Not just me, you robbed us all."

He walked on through the broad cracked streets, past the endless rows of small flat houses with their raddled fronts and crumbling patios, houses with all the infirmities of age but none of the dignity. They were made to be young and have fun, and now that day was gone. The families that lived in them were like Sam Macklin's family, subsisting partly on doles, partly on made work, rarely on the honest jobs that came usually with some kind of an emergency, where old-fashioned human labor was better than machines. "All of us!" thought Hobie, and, driven by firm resolution he strode faster on his long brown legs.

It was mid-morning, and blistering hot, when he reached the highway and got a lift on a local truck, heading north.

THE skyscrapers rose in a wall along the curving shore of the bay. Beyond them there were mountains, but Hobie could not see them except for an occasional glimpse when one of the broad avenues happened to open up a vista. People lived and worked and bred and died in this complex of stone and plastic, glass and metal. They never even had to go out of their buildings unless they wanted to for the fun of it. These people had money and they had real jobs, and Hobie's people envied them, but not viciously. They were Earthbound too, and they were needed. They kept things running, the daily-life matters of food and utilities and business. Hobie had been here before. He was used to flat little houses in little yards, and he felt closed in here. The tallness of the buildings did not impress him. When he thought what it must be like to live in one of these high crystal eyries overlooking the sea, all he could think of was how much higher were the roofs of Babylon.

The spaceport was at the very edge of the water, huge and round like a gigantic drumhead set down in the midst of the skyscrapers, with one tall pylon that towered over all the other towers as a man stands among children. It was getting on for evening when Hobie reached it. He was tired and very hungry, but he did

not mind that. He rode up the moving spiral stair to the visitors' level of the pylon and looked out over the landing field. Graceful and silent as birds, the great ships rode the sunset down, or lifted up in glorious soaring arcs toward the beaconing of the first stars. Since the development of the anti-grav field there had been no more use for rockets. The dramatics of flame and thunder and uncertainty had given way to a calm and quiet strength.

The strength that held up the cities.

In the days of Hobie's grandfather the cities had used to land here for servicing and supplies. But they were little then. They were experimental stations, and observatories, and research labs, and nobody had realized what they were going to be later. Now the cities rarely landed, finding it easier to use tenders. And they're afraid, Hobie thought, of what people might do to them if they let themselves get caught on the ground.

He found the passenger gate for the Babylon tender, and saw that he had six minutes less than an hour in which to figure out a way to get on it.

It did not take half that long.

THE freight loading ramps were on the level below, and Hobie could see that the open lower hatches of the tender were

already receiving cargo. Gawking about with apparent carelessness among the throngs of sightseers, Hobie located the rear precincts of the pylon which were reserved for spaceport personnel. He managed to slip unnoticed through the fire-door, into a service corridor. Twice he was almost, but not quite, caught as people went by. The second time he took refuge in a room where various sorts of cleaning apparatus were stored. He found one ordinary portable vacuum, picked it up and walked out with it. He walked to the service stair and rode down, and no one paid any attention to him.

The freight level was hugely noisy. Elevators, sorters, lifters, shunters and conveyor belts slapped and banged, clanked and rattled, chuffed and wheezed and squealed. The streams of boxes and crates and packages were dizzying, going every whichway and never stopping. Making his face as blank and stupid as he could, Hobie edged around the walls. There were some men on the floor, superintending the machines, but they were busy and they did not at first notice Hobie, who was fairly well hidden by the moving belts. Hobie was looking for his gate number. He found it. It was divided into two sections. A conveyor belt passed through the larger one. The smaller one, marked PERISHABLE, had no conveyor belt. Half a dozen motor-

ized carriers were lined up beside it, loaded with foods, drugs and liquids that couldn't stand freezing or vacuum. Hobie smiled. This was what he had been looking for. He knew all about the cities and the way they were supplied and guarded and cared for. There wasn't much he didn't know about the cities.

A man's voice said behind him, "What are you doing here?"

Hobie's guts contracted with a sharp pain. But he made himself turn and say reproachfully, "Nothing, man." He indicated the vacuum cleaner. "I'm supposed to take this for fixing."

"Well, take it, then," the man said. "Don't hang around here."

Hobie's eyes were shallow and ingenuous as a flounder's. "I was just looking."

"Look someplace else. You know what'll happen if you get yourself caught in the machinery?"

"What?"

"The whole goddam spaceport'll be shut down for two hours while we dig out the pieces. Go on, git."

Hobie slouched away. When he glanced back the man had disappeared. Hobie looked all around. He was afraid to take the chance because he would only have one, but waiting wasn't going to help either. His heart pounded and he could taste the sweat that was coming on his face. Suddenly he

tossed the vacuum cleaner on the belt that rumbled and thumped beside him, and he ran, fast and light-footed in his canvas shoes, and jumped onto one of the carriers and burrowed and folded himself down small amid the sacks and boxes.

A half hour later, in the close dark of a warmed and pressurized hold, Hobie rose toward the orbit of the city of Babylon.

He wondered who would get the vacuum cleaner.

HOBIE stood in a crystal pod with nothing under his feet or over his head, so that he seemed to be standing in the middle of the sky. If he looked up, or ahead, or on either side, he saw black immensity hung with stars, and the stars had depth to them, and they burned the way stars ought to, hot and glorious and in many colors, and not as he had always seen them like lights pasted on a flat surface, and even then they took your breath away.

If he looked down he saw the Earth, round and rolling beneath his feet. The night was sliding away from him. The golden sickle edge of morning bent across the world and suddenly the tremendous sun-blast hit him, a crash of light that made him cringe and cower. He thought for a moment that it had killed him, but some automatic shielding protected the pod. He could endure the light.

He could see clouds flash burnished silver above the blue of an ocean. There were more clouds, and then a continent began to emerge in shades of green and brown, very misty and oddly unreal. Hobie tried to decide what continent it was, matching the shape he saw with the few maps he could remember from school. Europe, he thought, and the Atlantic, but he was not sure, and this brought a flush of rage over his awe and spoiled it.

He remembered why he was here.

He turned around to leave the pod, and there was a girl standing and watching him.

"It did that to me, too," she said, "the first time I saw it."

"Did what?" asked Hobie.

"Sort of doubled me up." She smiled. She was pretty, in a firm, clear-cut way. She wore a dark skirt and sandals and a white shirt, all very clean and trim. Her hair was only a little bit curly, dark brown with lighter places where the sun caught in it. Hobie hated her. And he was terribly afraid.

She was looking at his clothes, the sun-faded shorts and gaudy shirt. "You must be awfully new here."

"I am." He wanted to run but he didn't dare.

"Who are you studying with?"

"I'm sorry," Hobie said. "I have to go." He stood up tall and

walked past her, making himself not hurry.

"Don't go to your first class like that," she said. "Go up to Three and show your card. They'll take care of you."

She meant it kindly. Hobie did not thank her. He strode away, into the corridor that served as a street. At the first possible moment he turned into a connecting corridor out of her sight. And now he hurried. He had already been far luckier than he deserved. Pa would say it was because right was riding with him, and he believed that. Only it seemed ungrateful to push things too far.

THERE were close to two thousand people in Babylon, enough for a stranger to get by in for a while. Sooner or later, though, someone would start asking him questions, someone he couldn't walk away from as easily as he had the girl.

There wasn't any reason to wait. There hadn't been any reason to wait even this hour or two, except that he wanted to see a little of the city so he could enjoy more thoroughly what he was doing.

This was a residential level. The blocks of apartments ran around the ovoid circumference of the city, so that at least one room could look out over the clouds and the rolling Earth. The inner area was divided up into

community rooms, a theatre, recreation centers, a playground and school for the small children. Hobie looked for the luxuries and the whoredoms that Pa had talked about. They must be on another level, because all he saw here was people, mostly women and kids, going about the business of daily living, and what he could glimpse of the apartments through an occasional open door, or see of the community rooms, was clean and attractive, better than what Hobie's people had, but not nearly as fancy as the skyscrapers back down on Earth.

He looked at the women and kids, and for a moment he got sick and weak at the thought of what he was going to do. But he hardened his heart. The innocent sometimes had to suffer with the guilty. He thought of Pa and all the other men like him, and of himself and his kid brothers and Joanie Ann, robbed of their birthright, dragging their lives out on doles and sufferance, because of these people, and the people like them on the other cities.

He went on. And twice, as he crossed connecting corridors, he thought he saw at a distance the flicker of a white shirt. Each time he stopped and looked, and thought he must have been mistaken.

He found the lift that had brought him from the big lock-chamber where the tender docked.

He got into it and pushed the button for the topmost level. Strangely, now that he was on the last step of his journey, he felt calm and steady. In the tender's hold he had broken into some of the food packages and stayed his hunger, and there had even been time to sleep. So he was in good shape for what he was about to do.

The highest level of Babylon was domed with the same crystal as the observation pod. It was flooded with the raw blaze of the Sun. Here there were nothing but laboratories and observatories and barred doors that said DANGER UNSHIELDED AREA BEYOND, or DANGER VACUUM CHAMBER, or STERILE AREA AUTHORIZED PERSONS ONLY. Through glass-walled partitions Hobie could see rooms full of all kinds of things he did not understand. Men and women and young people like himself, dressed in white smocks or in protective clothing, went about their incomprehensible work. Evil work, Pa said, taking the bread out of honest men's mouths with their fine new ways of doing things, spending millions of dollars fooling around with a lot of stuff that sounded big and important but never came to anything you could buy, sell, or eat. A lot of it came to nothing at all, and was a wicked waste when there were people needing things. Hobie went furtively along the cor-

ridors, peering with a fierce and terrible pride through the partitions at the people who did not know that he was there, and he felt that he was not himself now, Hobie Macklin, but he was all the men and women and kids he knew rolled together, rising up and smiting in their just wrath. He felt ennobled. He felt as glorious and as powerful as God.

He found a door that said POWER PLANT KEEP OUT AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

He went through it.

ABOVE the clear dome great golden vanes extended to trap the sunlight and draw power from it, sucking it down into giant batteries that fed the city; the anti-grav field, the pumping systems, the light and air and heat. All of this apparatus occupied about three-fourths of the space in the large steel-floored room, enormous shapes of dull metal and plastic that dwarfed the men who tended them. The other fourth of the room was taken up by a monstrous control-panel.

Men walked up and down, or sat in metal chairs, in front of this panel, watching the thousand dials and ten thousand lights on it, keeping the city alive. They turned around when the door opened. They looked at Hobie. There were five of them, two walking, three sitting, and there

were two empty, strong, heavy chairs. Hobie ran toward the control panel. He moved as he had sometimes moved in dreams, light and rushing, powerful, resistless. The faces of the men regarded him in startled wonder. He smiled and reached out his hands toward the nearest chair, to lift and smash and crumple. "And mighty", he thought, "mighty was the fall thereof."

There was no warning at all. The flash and the hammer stroke came together, out of nowhere, into Hobie's brain. In one split second he simply stopped being.

* * *

The girl was looking at him.

"It was something about his eyes," she said. "I just had to follow him. I thought I might help him . . . Then I saw that he wasn't going to Three, or the classrooms, and I thought that I'd better tell you."

There were three men in the room, beside the girl. They looked down at Hobie, their faces frowning and concerned. The room was very small, antiseptically light and uncluttered. Hobie lay in a bed. On his left hand the wall beside the bed was made of crystal. He could easily look out through it and see the shadow of Babylon laid sharp and black across the blaze of the Sun, reaching down like a long finger toward the silver-blue edge of the Earth.

"That wasn't fair," said Hobie.

One of the men touched the girl on the shoulder and smiled. "Thanks, Ellen. You can go along to your class now."

The girl nodded. She looked again at Hobie. It seemed to him that she wanted very much to say something, but she turned away and went out. The man leaned over the foot of the bed. He was short and rather slight in build. Hobie knew that he would tower over him if he was standing, and that was the only advantage he would have. This man was strong to lead, like Pa, only in a different way.

"All right, now Hobie," said the man. "What wasn't fair?"

"I thought I knew everything about the cities. You kept a few things hid." He still felt strange and sluggish in his body and his mind was dulled, so that it took him a minute or two to realize that he was alive, whole, a captive, and that there was no doubt at all what he had been trying to do.

Oddly, he didn't seem to feel disappointed that he had not been able to do it.

He looked at the man. "Why didn't you kill me?"

"There wasn't any need to. And we keep a few things hid, as you say, for our own protection. My name is Todd. I'm responsible for security." He motioned first to the man on his right, and then to the one on his left. "This is

Mr. Chowdhury, our coordinator—you might say our mayor—and Mr. Lecayo." He did not explain who Mr. Lecayo was. He held up a card that Hobie recognized as his own ID for job line-ups and the distribution of surplus foods.

"Gentlemen," said Todd, "this is Hobie Macklin. Sam Macklin's son."

Hobie was startled. "You mean you know about Pa? I didn't . . ."

"We know about him," said Mr. Lecayo. He shook his head. "Your father is shaping into one of the most alarming rabble-rousers we've had after us yet."

"Rabble-rouser," said Hobie. He thrust himself upon the bed. "My father . . ."

"Did he send you?" asked Todd quietly.

"No," said Hobie. He began to be alarmed, "No, sir, he didn't. This was my own idea."

"Why did you want to do it?"

"Because Pa's way is too slow. He's all for laws and talking. I couldn't wait." He looked at them bitterly. "But you even robbed me of that."

HOW old are you, Hobie? asked Lecayo.

"I'll be eighteen next month."

"How much schooling have you had?"

"Eighth grade."

"You're proud of that."

"Sure. That's all anybody

needs. I can remember when there was some high-schoolers in the neighborhood. Not for a long time, though."

"Rough on them, was it?"

"Rough," said Hobie. "It sure was. Finally the old high-school got turned into a hospital. See, we don't have our heads in the clouds, Mr. Lecayo. We like things to be some real use to somebody."

"Did you have much trouble, Hobie?"

"Trouble?"

"It must have been difficult to hide."

"Hide what?"

"The fact that you're a highly intelligent boy."

Hobie's heart began to beat fast. Sweat broke out on him. He looked away from Lecayo and said rapidly, angrily. "Sure I am. That's what Pa's doing his 'rabble-rousing' about. We're just as good as you are. We've got a right to jobs, good jobs. We've got a right . . ."

"And you were afraid to go past the eighth grade."

Hobie stared blindly through the glass wall, remembering things he did not want to remember. Remembering two different times, once in the fifth grade, once in the seventh, when the other kids had beat up on him for being a smarty so-and-so. Remembering how he himself had joined a snarling, sneering, jeering little mob to chivvy another

boy who was a damned know-it-all. His mouth was dry. "Pa says . . ."

Chowdhury's voice was gentle. "Pa says it's all our fault, and if the cities were abolished, everything would be fine."

"You took our jobs away, with the machines and things you thought up. You made yourselves better than us. You sit up here . . ." Hobie had been going to talk about the luxuries and whoredoms, but now the words seemed unreal and refused to come out.

"The cities have become symbols of all your frustrations," Lecayo said. "Actually, they're what they always were, centers of learning. They've grown bigger and they've changed, that's all. We can do research here that can't be done on the ground, and the climate is friendlier. We feel freer."

"You took our jobs away," said Hobie stubbornly. "We'll never get 'em back, we'll never be men again until . . ."

"You want a job," said Chowdhury. "What can you do? Swing a hoe? A pick and shovel? Operate a simple machine?" He shook his head. "Your people are a luxury, Hobie, like the horse. Our researches find new and cheaper ways to produce the necessities of life, so that the country can afford to keep you reasonably well fed and clothed and housed. And

instead of doing what you can do to help yourselves, you rivet your status more firmly around your necks every year."

The mild gentle voice suddenly had a note of startling anger in it.

"Nothing can be done about the genuinely stupid. In all ages and times they suffer, and I suppose they can't be blamed for making a virtue out of stupidity since they're stuck with it anyway. But your father and the others like him who are perfectly capable of learning, and who refuse to learn out of laziness and resentment, and who then make such a social virtue out of ignorance—*ignorance*, Hobie, not stupidity—that youngsters like you are shamed and pressured into denying their intelligence, these are not fools, these are criminals."

HOBIE looked at them miserably from the bed. A lot of Pa's words went rumbling around in his mind. Only one came to his tongue. "Eggheads," he said "Eggheads."

Todd grinned. "Oh, no. The ones you think of as eggheads never make it up here. We operate on Think-Do. They only Think."

"Answer me one question," Lecayo said. "Honestly. Did you try to destroy Babylon because you truly hate it, or because you wanted it more than anything else in the world, and couldn't have it."

There was a long silence.

Finally Hobie said in a small voice. "What are you going to do with me?"

Chowdhury said, "You haven't answered Mr. Lecayo."

"Yes, he has," said Lecayo. He looked pleased, and nodded to Todd.

"We're going to send you home," said Todd. "Now listen to me, Hobie, very carefully. If you decide that you want to try to come back here someday—through the front door, with your head up—you go to the Educational Foundation. You know where that is, on the square five blocks north of the spaceport. Tell them who you are, and you'll be taken care of. A lot of your time has been lost, and you would have to work extremely hard, so be sure that you want to go through with it. If you decide to stay with your father, that's up to you. But Hobie . . ."

He fixed Hobie with his eyes, and Hobie shivered. "Don't try this again," Todd said.

Hobie hung his head.

After a while they took him down to the lowest level where the tender was waiting. As he entered the lock-chamber he saw the girl Ellen standing a little distance away, watching him. He looked at her, and now he wanted to say something, and could not. He followed Todd and the others to the tender.

Just before they left him Lecayo said, "There's nothing more important in the world than truth. It's often painful and hard to find, especially when it concerns yourself, and sometimes it's even dangerous. There's never been a day when it wasn't easier and pleasanter just to go along, and never question. You can go back to being part of your group. Or you can start being an individual. The choice is up to you."

Hobie did not answer. The three men went out of the tender. Hobie sat still and heavy as a rock while the tender dropped free of Babylon and swept in a long spiral toward the shining Earth.

* * *

HOBIE took two days to get home. Todd had given him some money and he could easily have taken a bus, but he walked instead, along the coast road where he could stop and sit and look at the ocean. At night he curled up in the cold sand and shivered, and watched the stars go by, the pale stars on the flat black surface of the sky. All that time he wanted desperately to go home, and yet he could not bring himself to do it. He tried desperately to think, and he could not. His mind remained locked tight like an iron box. He watched the bright star of Babylon pass through the heavens, and he felt

nothing. That was the strangest part of it. The hate was gone, but the iron box of his mind would not yield anything else to replace it.

Late on the second day he knew that it was time to go home, though he did not know why.

It was dark when he reached the house. He came like a skulking thief across the sun-singed grass of the yard, toward windows that showed a dim light. Cautiously, he peered into the living room. Ma and the boys were watching TV. He couldn't see their faces but Ma was sitting in a kind of dejected way, and Hobie realized suddenly how he must have worried her, taking off like that without a word. He wanted to run inside and throw himself down beside her and say, "I'm home, I'm home," and really *be* home, but he didn't move. He did not see Pa. Then he heard the front door open and shut, and knew that he was standing on the porch. Hobie turned and went with stiff slow steps to the front walk.

"Pa."

Sam Macklin stood high and shadowy and tall above him. "Give me a minute, Hobie. Give me a minute to know if I'll put my arms around you, or belt-strap you within an inch of your life."

"Pa," said Hobie again. He looked up, remembering the love and pride.

"Where have you been? What made you go off like that?"

"Pa, it wasn't the cities that robbed me."

"What are you talking about." Sam Macklin came down the two cracked shallow steps.

Hobie moved back. "It was you," he said. "You robbed me." He backed farther still, afraid of this tall man his father, afraid because the love and the pride were still there, and the iron box had come wide open, and everything was a dark confusion of pain and loss. And still the words came.

"I'm leaving you. I got to leave you and be what I am. I almost . . ." He stopped and tried again. "Because you made me into something else, I . . ."

Suddenly he turned and ran, salt-eyed and sobbing, away down the dark street.

Sam Macklin's voice rang after him, "Hobie! Hobie!" But he lost himself in a tangle of yards and fences and winding blocks of houses, and the voice grew faint.

Finally it stopped.

Hobie walked on toward the highway.

Just before dawn a brilliant star passed over. Hobie reached up his hands toward it, and smiled.

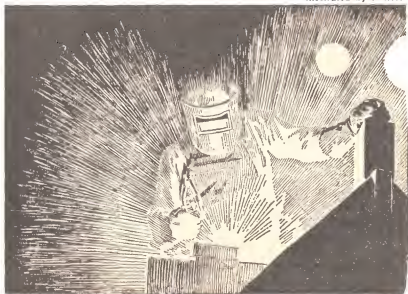
Gateway to Strangeness

By JACK VANCE

*The ship, its great sail spread to the fading sunlight,
fled through space like a ghost—out, always out.*

*There were still a billion miles to travel . . . a billion
miles before they'd know whether they would ever come back.*

Illustrated by FINLAY



HENRY BELT came limping into the conference room mounted the dais, settled himself at the desk. He looked once around the room: a swift bright glance which, focusing nowhere, treated the eight young men who faced him to an almost insulting disinterest. He reached in his pocket, brought forth a pencil and a flat red book, which he placed on the desk. The eight young men watched in absolute silence. They were much alike: healthy, clean, smart, their expressions identically alert and wary. Each had heard legends of Henry Belt, each had formed his

private plans and private determinations.

Henry Belt seemed a man of a different species. His face was broad, flat, roped with cartilage and muscle, with skin the color and texture of bacon rind. Coarse white grizzle covered his scalp, his eyes were crafty slits, his nose a misshapen lump. His shoulders were massive, his legs short and gnarled.

"First of all," said Henry Belt, with a gap-toothed grin, "I'll make it clear that I don't expect you to like me. If you do I'll be surprised and displeased. It will mean that I haven't pushed you hard enough."

He leaned back in his chair,



surveyed the silent group. "You've heard stories about me. Why haven't they kicked me out of the service? Incurable, arrogant, dangerous Henry Belt. Drunken Henry Belt. (This last of course is slander. Henry Belt has never been drunk in his life.) Why do they tolerate me? For one simple reason: out of necessity. No one wants to take on this kind of job. Only a man like Henry Belt can stand up to it: year after year in space, with nothing to look at but a half-dozen round-faced young scrubs. He takes them out, he brings them back. Not all of them, and not all of those who come back are space-men today. But they'll all cross the street when they see him coming. Henry Belt? you say. They'll turn pale or go red. None of them will smile. Some of them are high-placed now. They could kick me loose if they chose. Ask them why they don't. Henry Belt is a terror, they'll tell you. He's wicked, he's a tyrant. Cruel as an axe, fickle as a woman. But a voyage with Henry Belt blows the foam off the beer. He's ruined many a man, he's killed a few, but those that come out of it are proud to say, I trained with Henry Belt!

ANOTHER thing you may hear: Henry Belt has luck. But don't pay any heed. Luck runs out. You'll be my thirteenth class, and that's unlucky. I've

taken out seventy-two young sprats, no different from yourselves; I've come back twelve times: which is partly Henry Belt and partly luck. The voyages average about two years long: how can a man stand it? There's only one who could: Henry Belt. I've got more space-time than any man alive, and now I'll tell you a secret: this is my last time out. I'm starting to wake up at night to strange visions. After this class I'll quit. I hope you lads aren't superstitious. A white-eyed woman told me that I'd die in space. She told me other things and they've all come true. "We'll get to know each other well. And you'll be wondering on what basis I make my recommendations. Am I objective and fair? Do I put aside personal animosity? Naturally there won't be any friendship. Well, here's my system. I keep a red book. Here it is. I'll put your names down right now. You, sir?"

"I'm Cadet Lewis Lynch, sir."

"You?"

"Edward Culpepper, sir."

"Marcus Verona, sir."

"Vidal Weske, sir."

"Marvin McGrath, sir."

"Barry Ostrander, sir."

"Clyde von Gluck, sir."

"Joseph Sutton, sir."

Henry Belt wrote the names in the red book. "This is the system. When you do something to annoy me, I mark you down de-

merits. At the end of the voyage I total these demerits, add a few here and there for luck, and am so guided. I'm sure nothing could be clearer than this. What annoys me? Ah, that's a question which is hard to answer. If you talk too much: demerits. If you're surly and taciturn: demerits. If you slouch and laze and dog the dirty work: demerits. If you're over-zealous and forever scuttling about: demerits. Obsequiousness: demerits. Truculence: demerits. If you sing and whistle: demerits. If you're a stolid bloody bore: demerits. You can see that the line is hard to draw. Here's a hint which can save you many marks. I don't like gossip, especially when it concerns myself. I'm a sensitive man, and I open my red book fast when I think I'm being insulted." Henry Belt once more leaned back in his chair. "Any questions?"

No one spoke.

Henry Belt nodded. "Wise. Best not to flaunt your ignorance so early in the game. In response to the thought passing through each of your skulls, I do not think of myself as God. But you may do so, if you choose. And this—" he held up the red book "—you may regard as the Syncretic Compendium. Very well. Any questions?"

"Yes sir," said Culpepper.

"Speak, sir."

"Any objection to alcoholic beverages aboard ship, sir?"

"For the cadets, yes indeed. I concede that the water must be carried in any event, that the organic compounds present may be reconstituted, but unluckily the bottles weigh far too much."

"I understand, sir."

Henry Belt rose to his feet. "One last word. Have I mentioned that I run a tight ship? When I say jump, I expect everyone of you to jump. This is dangerous work, of course. I don't guarantee your safety. Far from it, especially since we are assigned to old 25, which should have been broken up long ago. There are eight of you present. Only six cadets will make the voyage. Before the week is over I will make the appropriate notifications. Any more questions? . . . Very well, then. Cheerio." Limping on his thin legs as if his feet hurt Henry Belt departed into the back passage.

FOR a moment or two there was silence. Then von Gluck said in a soft voice, "My gracious."

"He's a tyrannical lunatic," grumbled Weske. "I've never heard anything like it! Megalomania!"

"Easy," said Culpepper. "Remember, no gossiping."

"Bah!" muttered McGrath. "This is a free country. I'll damn well say what I like."

Weske rose to his feet. "A wonder somebody hasn't killed him."

"I wouldn't want to try it," said Culpepper. "He looks tough." He made a gesture, stood up, brow furrowed in thought. Then he went to look along the passageway into which Henry Belt had made his departure. There, pressed to the wall, stood Henry Belt. "Yes, sir," said Culpepper suavely. "I forgot to inquire when you wanted us to convene again."

Henry Belt returned to the rostrum. "Now is as good a time as any." He took his seat, opened his red book. "You, Mr. von Gluck, made the remark, 'My gracious' in an offensive tone of voice. One demerit. You, Mr. Weske, employed the terms 'tyrannical lunatic' and 'megalo-mania', in reference to myself. Three demerits. Mr. McGrath, you observed that freedom of speech is the official doctrine of this country. It is a theory which presently we have no time to explore, but I believe that the statement in its present context carries an overtone of insubordination. One demerit. Mr. Culpepper, your imperturbable complacency irritates me. I prefer that you display more uncertainty, or even uneasiness."

"Sorry, sir."

"However, you took occasion to remind your colleagues of my

rule, and so I will not mark you down."

"Thank you, sir."

Henry Belt leaned back in the chair, stared at the ceiling. "Listen closely, as I do not care to repeat myself. Take notes if you wish. Topic: Solar Sails, Theory and Practice thereof. Material with which you should already be familiar, but which I will repeat in order to avoid ambiguity.

"First, why bother with the sail, when nuclear jet-ships are faster, more dependable, more direct, safer and easier to navigate? The answer is three-fold. First, a sail is not a bad way to move heavy cargo slowly but cheaply through space. Secondly, the range of the sail is unlimited, since we employ the mechanical pressure of light for thrust, and therefore need carry neither propulsive machinery, material to be ejected, nor energy source. The solar sail is much lighter than its nuclear-powered counterpart, and may carry a larger complement of men in a larger hull. Thirdly, to train a man for space there is no better instrument than the handling of a sail. The computer naturally calculates sail cant and plots the course; in fact, without the computer we'd be dead ducks. Nevertheless the control of a sail provides working familiarity with the cosmic elementals: light, gravity, mass, space.

THERE are two types of sail: pure and composite. The first relies on solar energy exclusively, the second carries a secondary power source. We have been assigned Number 25, which is the first sort. It consists of a hull, a large parabolic reflector which serves as radar and radio antenna, as well as reflector for the power generator; and the sail itself. The pressure of radiation, of course, is extremely slight—on the order of an ounce per acre at this distance from the sun. Necessarily the sail must be extremely large and extremely light. We use a fluoro-siliconic film a tenth of a mil in gauge, fogged with lithium to the state of opacity. I believe the layer of lithium is about a thousand two hundred molecules thick. Such a foil weighs about four tons to the square mile. It is fitted to a hoop of thin-walled tubing, from which mono-crystalline iron cords lead to the hull.

"We try to achieve a weight factor of six tons to the square mile, which produces an acceleration of between $g/100$ and $g/1000$ depending on proximity to the sun, angle of cant, circum-solar orbital speed, reflectivity of surface. These accelerations seem minute, but calculation shows them to be cumulatively enormous. $G/100$ yields a velocity increment of 800 miles per hour every hour, 18,000 miles per hour

each day, or five miles per second each day. At this rate inter-planetary distances are readily negotiable—with proper manipulation of the sail, I need hardly say.

"The virtues of the sail I've mentioned. It is cheap to build and cheap to operate. It requires neither fuel, nor ejectant. As it travels through space, the great area captures various ions, which may be expelled in the plasma jet powered by the parabolic reflector, which adds another increment to the acceleration.

"The disadvantages of the sail are those of the glider or sailing ship, in that we must use natural forces with great precision and delicacy.

"There is no particular limit to the size of the sail. On 25 we use about four square miles of sail. For the present voyage we will install a new sail, as the old is well-worn and eroded.

"That will be all for today." Once more Henry Belt limped down from the dais and out the passage. On this occasion there were no comments.

CHAPTER 2

THE eight cadets shared a dormitory, attended classes together, ate at the same table in the mess-hall. In various shops and laboratories they assembled, disassembled and reassembled

computers, pumps, generators, gyro-platforms, star-trackers, communication gear. "It's not enough to be clever with your hands," said Henry Belt. "Dexterity is not enough. Resourcefulness, creativity, the ability to make successful improvisations—these are more important. We'll test you out." And presently each of the cadets was introduced into a room on the floor of which lay a great heap of mingled housings, wires, flexes, gears, components of a dozen varieties of mechanism. "This is a twenty-six hour test," said Henry Belt. "Each of you has an identical set of components and supplies. There shall be no exchange of parts or information between you. Those whom I suspect of this fault will be dropped from the class, without recommendation. What I want you to build is, first, one standard Aminex Mark 9 Computer. Second, a servo-mechanism to orient a mass ten kilograms toward Mu Hercules. Why Mu Hercules?"

"Because, sir, the solar system moves in the direction of Mu Hercules, and we thereby avoid parallax error. Negligible though it may be, sir."

"The final comment smacks of frivolity, Mr. McGrath, which serves only to distract the attention of those who are trying to take careful note of my instructions. One demerit."

"Sorry, sir. I merely intended to express my awareness that for many practical purposes such a degree of accuracy is unnecessary."

"That idea, cadet, is sufficiently elemental that it need not be labored. I appreciate brevity and precision."

"Yes, sir."

"Thirdly, from these materials, assemble a communication system, operating on one hundred watts, which will permit two-way conversation between Tycho Base and Phobos, at whatever frequency you deem suitable."

THE cadets started in identical fashion by sorting the material into various piles, then calibrating and checking the test instruments. Achievement thereafter was disparate. Culpepper and von Gluck, diagnosing the test as partly one of mechanical ingenuity and partly ordeal by frustration, failed to become excited when several indispensable components proved either to be missing or inoperative, and carried each project as far as immediately feasible. McGrath and Weske, beginning with the computer, were reduced to rage and random action. Lynch and Sutton worked doggedly at the computer, Verona at the communication system.

Culpepper alone managed to

complete one of the instruments, by the process of sawing, polishing and cementing together sections of two broken crystals into a crude, inefficient but operative maser unit.

THE day after this test McGrath and Weske disappeared from the dormitory, whether by their own volition or notification from Henry Belt, no one ever knew.

The test was followed by week-end leave. Cadet Lynch, attending a cocktail party, found himself in conversation with a Lieutenant-Colonel Trenchard, who shook his head pityingly to hear that Lynch was training with Henry Belt.

"I was up with Old Horrors myself. I tell you it's a miracle we ever got back. Belt was drunk two-thirds of the voyage."

"How does he escape court-martial?" asked Lynch.

"Very simple. All the top men seem to have trained under Henry Belt. Naturally they hate his guts but they all take a perverse pride in the fact. And maybe they hope that someday a cadet will take him apart."

"Have any ever tried?"

"Oh yes. I took a swing at Henry once. I was lucky to escape with a broken collarbone and two sprained ankles. If you come back alive, you'll stand a good chance of reaching the top."

THE next evening Henry Belt passed the word. "Next Tuesday morning we go up. We'll be gone several months."

On Tuesday morning the cadets took their places in the angel-wagon. Henry Belt presently appeared. The pilot readied for take-off.

"Hold your hats. On the count . . ." The projectile thrust against the earth, strained, rose, went streaking up into the sky. An hour later the pilot pointed. "There's your boat. Old 25. And 39 right beside it, just in from space."

Henry Belt stared aghast from the port. "What's been done to the ship? The decoration? The red? the white? the yellow? The checkerboard."

"Thank some idiot of a land-lubber," said the pilot. "The word came to pretty the old boats for a junket of congressmen."

Henry Belt turned to the cadets. "Observe this foolishness. It is the result of vanity and ignorance. We will be occupied several days removing the paint."

They drifted close below the two sails: No. 39 just down from space, spare and polished beside the bedizened structure of No 25. In 39's exit port a group of men waited, their gear floating at the end of cords.

"Observe those men," said Henry Belt. "They are jaunty. They have been on a pleasant

outing around the planet Mars. They are poorly trained. When you gentlemen return you will be haggard and desperate and well-trained. Now, gentlemen, clamp your helmets, and we will proceed."

The helmets were secured. Henry Belt's voice came by radio. "Lynch, Ostrander will remain here to discharge cargo. Verona, Culpepper, von Gluck, Sutton, leap with cords to the ship; ferry across the cargo, stow it in the proper hatches."

Henry Belt took charge of his personal cargo, which consisted of several large cases. He eased them out into space, clipped on lines, thrust them toward 25, leapt after. Pulling himself and the cases to the entrance port he disappeared within.

Discharge of cargo was effected. The crew from 39 transferred to the carrier, which thereupon swung down and away, thrust itself dwindling back toward earth.

WHEN the cargo had been stowed, the cadets gathered in the wardroom. Henry Belt appeared from the master's cubicle. "Gentlemen, how do you like the surroundings? Eh, Mr. Culpepper?"

"The hull is commodious, sir. The view is superb."

Henry Belt nodded. "Mr. Lynch? Your impressions?"

"I'm afraid I haven't sorted them out yet, sir."

"I see. You, Mr. Sutton?"

"Space is larger than I imagined it, sir."

"True. Space is unimaginable. A good space-man must either be larger than space, or he must ignore it. Both difficult. Well, gentlemen, I will make a few comments, then I will retire and enjoy the voyage. Since this is my last time out, I intend to do nothing whatever. The operation of the ship will be completely in your hands. I will merely appear from time to time to beam benevolently about or alas! to make marks in my red book. Nominally I shall be in command, but you six will enjoy complete control over the ship. If you return us safely to Earth I will make an approving entry in my red book. If you wreck us or fling us into the sun, you will be more unhappy than I, since it is my destiny to die in space. Mr. von Gluck, do I perceive a smirk on your face?"

"No, sir, it is a thoughtful half-smile."

"What is humorous in the concept of my demise, may I ask?"

"It will be a great tragedy, sir. I merely was reflecting upon the contemporary persistence of, well, not exactly superstition, but, let us say, the conviction of a subjective cosmos."

Henry Belt made a notation in

the red book. "Whatever is meant by this barbaric jargon I'm sure I don't know, Mr. von Gluck. It is clear that you fancy yourself a philosopher and dialectician. I will not fault this, so long as your remarks conceal no overtones of malice and insolence, to which I am extremely sensitive. Now as to the persistence of superstition, only an impoverished mind considers itself the repository of absolute knowledge. Hamlet spoke on this subject to Horatio, as I recall, in the well-known work by William Shakespeare. I myself have seen strange and terrifying sights. Were they hallucinations? Were they the manipulation of the cosmos by my mind or the mind of someone—or something—other than myself? I do not know. I therefore counsel a flexible attitude toward matters where the truth is still unknown. For this reason: the impact of an inexplicable experience may well destroy a mind which is too brittle. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very good. To return, then. We shall set a system of watches whereby each man works in turn with each of the other five. I thereby hope to discourage the formation of special friendships, or cliques."

YOU have inspected the ship. The hull is a sandwich of

lithium-beryllium, insulating foam, fiber and an interior skin. Very light, held rigid by air pressure rather than by any innate strength of the material. We can therefore afford enough space to stretch our legs and provide all of us with privacy.

"The master's cubicle is to the left; under no circumstances is anyone permitted in my quarters. If you wish to speak to me, knock on my door. If I appear, good. If I do not appear, go away. To the right are six cubicles which you may now distribute among yourselves by lot."

"Your schedule will be two hours study, four hours on watch, six hours off. I will require no specific rate of study progress, but I recommend that you make good use of your time."

"Our destination is Mars. We will presently construct a new sail, then while orbital velocity builds up, you will carefully test and check all equipment aboard. Each of you will compute sail cant and course and work out among yourselves any discrepancies which may appear. I shall take no hand in navigation. I prefer that you involve me in no disaster. If any such occur I shall severely mark down the persons responsible."

"Singing, whistling, humming, are forbidden. I disapprove of fear and hysteria, and mark accordingly. No one dies more than



once; we are well aware of the risks of this, our chosen occupation. There will be no practical jokes. You may fight, so long as you do not disturb me or break any instruments; however I counsel against it, as it leads to resentment, and I have known cadets to kill each other. I suggest coolness and detachment in your personal relations. Use of the micro-film projector is of course at your own option. You may not use the radio either to despatch or receive messages. In fact I have put the radio out of commission, as is my practice. I do this to emphasize the fact that, sink or swim, we must make do with our own resources. Are there any questions? . . . Very good. You will find that if you all behave with scrupulous cor-

rectness and accuracy, we shall in due course return safe and sound, with a minimum of demerit and no casualties. I am bound to say, however, that in twelve previous voyages this has failed to occur. Now you select your cubicles, stow your gear. The carrier will bring up the new sail tomorrow, and you will go to work."

CHAPTER 3

THE carrier discharged a great bundle of three-inch tubing: paper-thin lithium hardened with beryllium, reinforced with filaments of mono-crystalline iron—a total length of eight miles. The cadets fitted the tubes end to end, cementing the joints. When the tube extended a quarter-mile it was bent bow-shaped by a cord stretched between two ends, and further sections added. As the process continued the free end curved far out and around, and presently began to veer back in toward the hull. When the last tube was in place the loose end was hauled down, socketed home, to form a great hoop two miles and a half in diameter.

Henry Belt came out occasionally in his space suit to look on, and occasionally spoke a few words of sardonic comment, to which the cadets paid little heed. Their mood had changed; this was exhilaration, to be weight-

lessly afloat above the bright cloud-marked globe, with continent and ocean wheeling massively below. Anything seemed possible, even the training voyage with Henry Belt! When he came out to inspect their work, they grinned at each other with indulgent amusement. Henry Belt suddenly seemed a rather pitiful creature, a poor vagabond suited only for drunken bluster. Fortunate indeed that they were less naive than Henry Belt's previous classes! They had taken Belt seriously; he had cowed them, reduced them to nervous pulp. Not this crew, not by a long shot! They saw through Henry Belt! Just keep your nose clean, do your work, keep cheerful. The training voyage won't last but a few months, and then real life begins. Gut it out, ignore Henry Belt as much as possible. This is the sensible attitude; the best way to keep on top of the situation.

Already the group had made a composite assessment of its members, arriving at a set of convenient labels. Culpepper: smooth, suave, easy-going. Lynch: excitable, argumentative, hot-tempered. Von Gluck: the artistic temperament, delicate with hands and sensibilities. Ostrander: prissy, finicky, over-tidy. Sutton: goody, suspicious, competitive. Verona: the plugger, rough at the edges, but persistent and reliable.

AROUND the hull swung the gleaming hoop, and now the carrier brought up the sail, a great roll of darkly shining stuff. When unfolded and unrolled, and unfolded many times more it became a tough gleaming film, flimsy as gold leaf. Unfolded to its fullest extent it was a shimmering disk, already rippling and bulging to the light of the sun. The cadets fitted the film to the hoop, stretched it taut as a drum-head, cemented it in place. Now the sail must carefully be held edge on to the sun, or it would quickly move away, under a thrust of about a hundred pounds.

From the rim braided-iron threads were led to a ring at the back of the parabolic reflector, dwarfing this as the reflector



dwarfed the hull, and now the sail was ready to move.

The carrier brought up a final cargo: water, food, spare parts, a new magazine for the microfilm viewer, mail. Then Henry Belt said, "Make sail."

This was the process of turning the sail to catch the sunlight while the hull moved around Earth away from the sun, canting it parallel to the sun-rays when the ship moved on the sunward leg of its orbit: in short, building up an orbital velocity which in due course would stretch loose the bonds of terrestrial gravity and send Sail 25 kiting out toward Mars.

During this period the cadets checked every item of equipment aboard the vessel. They grimaced with disgust and dismay at some of the instruments: 25 was an old ship, with antiquated gear. Henry Belt seemed to enjoy their grumbling. "This is a training voyage, not a pleasure cruise. If you wanted your noses wiped, you should have taken a post on the ground. And, I have no sympathy for fault-finders. If you wish a model by which to form your own conduct, observe me."

The moody introspective Sutton, usually the most diffident and laconic of individuals, ventured an ill-advised witticism. "If we modeled ourselves after you, sir, there'd be no room to move for the whiskey."

Out came the red book. "Extraordinary impudence, Mr. Sutton. How can you yield so easily to malice?"

Sutton flushed pink; his eyes glistened, he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it firmly. Henry Belt, waiting politely expectant, turned away. "You gentlemen will perceive that I rigorously obey my own rules of conduct. I am regular as a clock. There is no better, more genial shipmate than Henry Belt. There is not a fairer man alive. Mr. Culpepper, you have a remark to make?"

"Nothing of consequence, sir."

HENRY BELT went to the port, glared out at the sail. He swung around instantly. "Who is on watch?"

"Sutton and Ostrander, sir."

"Gentlemen, have you noticed the sail? It has swung about and is canting to show its back to the sun. In another ten minutes we shall be tangled in a hundred miles of guy-wires."

Sutton and Ostrander sprang to repair the situation. Henry Belt shook his head disparagingly. "This is precisely what is meant by the words 'negligence' and 'inattentiveness'. You two have committed a serious error. This is poor spacemanship. The sail must always be in such a position as to hold the wires taut."

"There seems to be something wrong with the sensor, sir," Sutton blurted. "It should notify us when the sail swings behind us."

"I fear I must charge you an additional demerit for making excuses, Mr. Sutton. It is your duty to assure yourself that all the warning devices are functioning properly, at all times. Machinery must never be used as a substitute for vigilance."

Ostrander looked up from the control console. "Someone has turned off the switch, sir. I do not offer this as an excuse, but as an explanation."

"The line of distinction is often hard to define, Mr. Ostrander. Please bear in mind my remarks on the subject of vigilance."

"Yes, sir, but—who turned off the switch?"

"Both you and Mr. Sutton are theoretically hard at work watching for any such accident or occurrence. Did you not observe it?"

"No, sir."

"I might almost accuse you of further inattention and neglect, in this case."

Ostrander gave Henry Belt a long dubious side-glance. "The only person I recall going near the console is yourself, sir. I'm sure you wouldn't do such a thing."

Henry Belt shook his head sadly. "In space you must never rely on anyone for rational con-

duct. A few moments ago Mr. Sutton unfairly imputed to me an unusual thirst for whiskey. Suppose this were the case? Suppose, as an example of pure irony, that I had indeed been drinking whiskey, that I was in fact drunk?"

"I will agree, sir, that anything is possible."

HENRY BELT shook his head again. "That is the type of remark, Mr. Ostrander, that I have come to associate with Mr. Culpepper. A better response would have been, 'In the future, I will try to be ready for any conceivable contingency.' Mr. Sutton, did you make a hissing sound between your teeth?"

"I was breathing, sir."

"Please breathe with less vehemence."

Henry Belt turned away and wandered back and forth about the wardroom, scrutinizing cases, frowning at smudges on polished metal. Ostrander muttered something to Sutton, and both watched Henry Belt closely as he moved here and there. Presently Henry Belt lurched toward them. "You show great interest in my movements, gentlemen."

"We were on the watch for another unlikely contingency, sir."

"Very good, Mr. Ostrander. Stick with it. In space nothing is impossible. I'll vouch for this personally."

HENRY BELT sent all hands out to remove the paint from the surface of the parabolic reflector. When this had been accomplished, incident sunlight was now focussed upon an expanse of photo-electric cells. The power so generated was used to operate plasma jets, expelling ions collected by the vast expanse of sail, further accelerating the ship, thrusting it ever out into an orbit of escape. And finally one day, at an exact instant dictated by the computer, the ship departed from Earth and floated tangentially out into space, off at an angle for the orbit of Mars. At an acceleration of $g/100$ velocity built up rapidly. Earth dwindled behind; the ship was isolated in space. The cadets' exhilaration vanished, to be replaced by an almost funereal solemnity. The vision of Earth dwindling and retreating is an awesome symbol, equivalent to eternal loss, to the act of dying itself. The more impressionable cadets—Sutton, von Gluck, Osterlander—could not look astern without finding their eyes swimming with tears. Even the suave Culpepper was awed by the magnificence of the spectacle, the sun an aching pit not to be tolerated, Earth a plump pearl rolling on black velvet among a myriad glittering diamonds. And away from

Earth, away from the sun, opened an exalted magnificence of another order entirely. For the first time the cadets became dimly aware that Henry Belt had spoken truly of strange visions. Here was death, here was peace, solitude, star-blazing beauty which promised not oblivion in death, but eternity. . . . Streams and spatters of stars. . . . The familiar constellation, the stars with their prideful names presenting themselves like heroes: Achernar, Fomalhaut, Sadal, Suud, Canopus. . . .

Sutton could not bear to look into the sky. "It's not that I feel fear," he told von Gluck, "or yes, perhaps it is fear. It sucks at me, draws me out there. . . . I suppose in due course I'll become accustomed to it."

"I'm not so sure," said von Gluck. "I wouldn't be surprised if space could become a psychological addiction, a need—so that whenever you walked on Earth you felt hot and breathless."

LIFE settled into a routine. Henry Belt no longer seemed a man, but a capricious aspect of nature, like storm or lightning; and like some natural cataclysm, Henry Belt showed no favoritism, nor forgave one jot or tittle of offense. Apart from the private cubicles no place on the ship escaped his attention. Always he reeked of whiskey, and

it became a matter of covert speculation as to exactly how much whiskey he had brought aboard. But no matter how he reeked or how he swayed on his feet, his eyes remained clever and steady, and he spoke without slurring in his paradoxically clear sweet voice.

One day he seemed slightly drunker than usual, and ordered all hands into space-suits and out to inspect the sail for meteoric puncture. The order seemed sufficiently odd that the cadets stared at him in disbelief. "Gentlemen, you hesitate, you fail to exert yourselves, you luxuriate in sloth. Do you fancy yourselves at the Riviera? Into the space-suits, on the double, and everybody into space. Check hoop, sail, reflector, struts and sensor. You will be adrift for two hours. When you return I want a comprehensive report. Mr. Lynch, I believe you are in charge of this watch. You will present the report."

"Yes, sir."

"One more matter. You will notice that the sail is slightly bellied by the continual radiation pressure. It therefore acts as a focusing device, the focal point presumably occurring behind the cab. But this is not a matter to be taken for granted. I have seen a man burnt to death in such a freak accident. Bear this in mind."

For two hours the cadets drifted through space, propelled by tanks of gas and thrust tubes. All enjoyed the experience except Sutton, who found himself appalled by the immensity of his emotions. Probably least affected was the practical Verona, who inspected the sail with a care exacting enough even to satisfy Henry Belt.

The next day the computer went wrong. Ostrander was in charge of the watch and knocked on Henry Belt's door to make the report.

Henry Belt appeared in the doorway. He apparently had been asleep. "What is the difficulty, Mr. Ostrander?"

"We're in trouble, sir. The computer has gone out."

Henry Belt rubbed his grizzled pate. "This is not an unusual circumstance. We prepare for this contingency by schooling all cadets thoroughly in computer design and repair. Have you identified the difficulty?"

"The bearings which suspend the data separation disks have broken. The shaft has several millimeters play and as a result there is total confusion in the data presented to the analyzer."

"An interesting problem. Why do you present it to me?"

"I thought you should be notified, sir. I don't believe we carry spares for this particular bearing."

Henry Belt shook his head sadly. "Mr. Ostrander, do you recall my statement at the beginning of this voyage, that you six gentlemen are totally responsible for the navigation of the ship?"

"Yes, sir. But—"

"This is an applicable situation. You must either repair the computer, or perform the calculations yourself."

"Very well, sir. I will do my best."

CHAPTER 5

LYNCH, Verona, Ostrander and Sutton disassembled the mechanism, removed the worn bearing. "Confounded antique!" said Lynch. "Why can't they give us decent equipment? Or if they want to kill us, why not shoot us and save us all trouble."

"We're not dead yet," said Verona. "You've looked for a spare?"

"Naturally. There's nothing remotely like this."

Verona looked at the bearing dubiously. "I suppose we could cast a babbitt sleeve and machine it to fit. That's what we'll have to do—unless you fellows are awfully fast with your math."

Sutton glanced out the port, quickly turned away his eyes. "I wonder if we should cut sail."

"Why?" asked Ostrander.

"We don't want to build up too much velocity. We're already going 30 miles a second."

"Mars is a long way off."

"And if we miss, we go shooting past. Then where are we?"

"Sutton, you're a pessimist. A shame to find morbid tendencies in one so young." This from von Gluck.

"I'd rather be a live pessimist than a dead comedian."

The new sleeve was duly cast, machined and fitted. Anxiously the alignment of the data disks was checked. "Well," said Verona dubiously, "there's wobble. How much that affects the functioning remains to be seen. We can take some of it out by shimming the mount. . . ."

Shims of tissue paper were inserted and the wobble seemed to be reduced. "Now—feed in the data," said Sutton. "Let's see how we stand."

Coordinates were fed into the system; the indicator swung. "Enlarge sail cant four degrees," said von Gluck, "we're making too much left concentric. Projected course . . ." he tapped buttons, watched the bright line extend across the screen, swing around a dot representing the center of gravity of Mars. "I make it an elliptical pass, about twenty thousand miles out. That's at present acceleration, and it should toss us right back at Earth."

"Great. Simply great. Let's go, 25!" This was Lynch. "I've heard of guys dropping flat on their faces and kissing Earth when they put down. Me, I'm going to live in a cave the rest of my life."

Sutton went to look at the data disks. The wobble was slight but perceptible. "Good Lord," he said huskily. "The other end of the shaft is loose too."

Lynch started to spit curses; Verona's shoulders slumped. "Let's get to work and fix it."

* * *

ANOTHER bearing was cast, machined, polished, mounted. The disks wobbled, scraped. Mars, another disk, shouldered ever closer in from the side. With the computer unreliable the cadets calculated and plotted the course manually. The results were at slight but significant variance with those of the computer. The cadets looked dourly at each other. "Well," growled Ostrander, "There's error. Is it the instruments? The calculation? The plotting? Or the computer?"

Culpepper said in a subdued voice, "Well, we're not about to crash head-on at any rate."

Verona went back to study the computer. "I can't imagine why the bearings don't work better. . . . The mounting brackets—could they have shifted?" He removed the side housing, studied

the frame, then went to the case for tools.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Sutton.

"Try to ease the mounting brackets around. I think that's our trouble."

"Leave me alone! You'll bugger the machine so it'll never work."

Verona paused, looked questioningly around the group. "Well? What's the verdict?"

"Maybe we'd better check with the old man," said Ostrander nervously.

"All well and good—but you know what he'll say."

"Let's deal cards. Ace of spades goes to ask him."

Culpepper received the ace. He knocked on Henry Belt's door. There was no response. He started to knock again, but restrained himself.

He returned to the group. "Wait till he shows himself. I'd rather crash into Mars than bring forth Henry Belt and his red book."

The ship crossed the orbit of Mars well ahead of the looming red planet. It came toppling at them with a peculiar clumsy grandeur, a mass obviously bulky and globular, but so fine and clear was the detail, so absent the perspective, that the distance and size might have been anything. Instead of swinging in a sharp elliptical curve back toward

Earth, the ship swerved aside in a blunt hyperbola and proceeded outward, now at a velocity of close to fifty miles a second. Mars receded astern and to the side. A new part of space lay ahead. The sun was noticeably smaller. Earth could no longer be differentiated from the stars. Mars departed quickly and politely, and space seemed lonely and forlorn.

HENRY BELT had not appeared for two days. At last Culpepper went to knock on the door—once, twice, three times: a strange face looked out. It was Henry Belt, face haggard, skin like pulled taffy. His eyes were red and glared, his hair seemed matted and more unkempt than hair a quarter-inch long should be.

But he spoke in his quiet clear voice. "Mr. Culpepper, your merciless din has disturbed me. I am quite put out with you."

"Sorry, sir. We feared that you were ill."

Henry Belt made no response. He looked past Culpepper, around the circle of faces. "You gentlemen are unwontedly serious. Has this presumptive illness of mine caused you all distress?"

Sutton spoke in a rush, "The computer is out of order."

"Why then, you must repair it."

"It's a matter of altering the

housing. If we do it incorrectly —"

"Mr. Sutton, please do not harass me with the hour-by-hour minutiae of running the ship."

"But, sir, the matter has become serious; we need your advice. We missed the Mars turnaround—"

"Well, I suppose there's always Jupiter. Must I explain the basic elements of astrogation to you?"

"But the computer's out of order—definitely."

"Then, if you wish to return to Earth, you must perform the calculations with pencil and paper. Why is it necessary to explain the obvious?"

"Jupiter is a long way out," said Sutton in a shrill voice. "Why can't we just turn around and go home?" This last was almost a whisper.

"I see I've been too easy on you cads," said Henry Belt. "You stand around idly; you chatter nonsense while the machinery goes to pieces and the ship flies at random. Everybody into space-suits for sail inspection. Come now. Let's have some snap. What are you all? Walking corpses? You, Mr. Culpepper, why the delay?"

"It occurred to me, sir, that we are approaching the asteroid belt. As I am chief of the watch I consider it my duty to cant sail to swing us around the area."

"You may do this; then join the rest in hull and sail inspection."

"Yes, sir."

The cadets donned space-suits, Sutton with the utmost reluctance. Out into the dark void they went, and now here was loneliness indeed.

When they returned, Henry Belt had returned to his compartment.

"As Mr. Belt points out, we have no great choice," said Os-trander. "We missed Mars, so let's hit Jupiter. Luckily it's in good position—otherwise we'd have to swing out to Saturn or Uranus—"

"They're off behind the sun," said Lynch. "Jupiter's our last chance."

"Let's do it right then. I say, let's make one last attempt to set those confounded bearings. . . ."

But now it seemed as if the wobble and twist had been eliminated. The disks tracked perfectly, the accuracy monitor glowed green.

"Great!" yelled Lynch. "Feed it the dope. Let's get going! All sail for Jupiter. Good Lord, but we're having a trip!"

"Wait till it's over," said Sutton. Since his return from sail inspection, he had stood to one side, cheeks pinched, eyes staring. "It's not over yet. And maybe it's not meant to be."

The other five pretended not to have heard him. The computer spat out figures and angles. There was a billion miles to travel. Acceleration was less, due to the diminution in the intensity of sunlight. At least a month must pass before Jupiter came close.

CHAPTER 6

THE ship, great sail spread to the fading sunlight, fled like a ghost—out, always out. Each of the cadets had quietly performed the same calculation, and arrived at the same result. If the swing around Jupiter were not performed with exactitude, if the ship were not slung back like a stone on a string, there was nothing beyond. Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto were far around the sun; the ship, speeding at a hundred miles a second, could not be halted by the waning gravity of the sun, nor yet sufficiently accelerated in a concentric direction by sail and jet into a true orbit. The very nature of the sail made it useless as a brake, always the thrust was outward.

Within the hull seven men lived and thought, and the psychic relationship worked and stirred like yeast in a vat of decaying fruit. The fundamental similarity, the human identity of the seven men, was utterly canceled; apparent only were the

disparaties. Each cadet appeared to others only as a walking characteristic, and Henry Belt was an incomprehensible Thing, who appeared from his compartment at unpredictable times, to move quietly here and there with the blind blank grin of an archaic Attic hero.

Jupiter loomed and bulked. The ship, at last within reach of the Jovian gravity, sidled over to meet it. The cadets gave ever more careful attention to the computer, checking and counter-checking the instructions. Verona was the most assiduous at this, Sutton the most harassed and ineffectual. Lynch growled and cursed and sweat; Ostrander complained in a thin peevish voice. Von Gluck worked with the calm of pessimistic fatalism; Culpepper seemed unconcerned, almost debonair, a blandness which bewildered Ostrander, infuriated Lynch, awoke a malignant hate in Sutton. Verona and von Gluck on the other hand seemed to derive strength and refreshment from Culpepper's placid acceptance of the situation. Henry Belt said nothing. Occasionally he emerged from his compartment, to survey the wardroom and the cadets with the detached interest of a visitor to an asylum.

It was Lynch who made the discovery. He signaled it with an odd growl of sheer dismay, which

brought a resonant questioning sound from Sutton. "My God, my God, muttered Lynch.

Verona was at his side. "What's the trouble?"

"Look. This gear. When we replaced the disks we de-phased the whole apparatus one notch. This white dot and this other white dot should synchronize. They're one sprocket apart. All the results would check and be consistent because they'd all be off by the same factor."

VERONA sprang into action. Off came the housing, off came various components. Gently he lifted the gear, set it back into correct alignment. The other cadets leaned over him as he worked, except Culpepper who was chief of the watch.

Henry Belt appeared. "You gentlemen are certainly diligent in your navigation," he said presently. "Perfectionists almost."

"We do our best," greeted Lynch between set teeth. "It's a damn shame sending us out with a machine like this."

The red book appeared. "Mr. Lynch, I mark you down not for your private sentiments, which are of course yours to entertain, but for voicing them and thereby contributing to an unhealthy atmosphere of despairing and hysterical pessimism."

A tide of red crept up from

Lynch's neck. He bent over the computer, made no comment. But Sutton suddenly cried out, "What else do you expect from us? We came out here to learn, not to suffer, or to fly on forever!" He gave a ghastly laugh. Henry Belt listened patiently. "Think of it!" cried Sutton. "The seven of us. In this capsule, forever!"

"I am afraid that I must charge you two demerits for your outburst, Mr. Sutton. A good space-man maintains his dignity at all costs."

Lynch looked up from the computer. "Well, now we've got a corrected reading. Do you know what it says?"

Henry Belt turned him a look of polite inquiry.

"We're going to miss," said Lynch. "We're going to pass by just as we passed Mars. Jupiter is pulling us around and sending us out toward Gemini."

The silence was thick in the room. Henry Belt turned to look at Culpepper, who was standing by the porthole, photographing Jupiter with his personal camera.

"Mr. Culpepper?"

"Yes, sir."

"You seem unconcerned by the prospect which Mr. Sutton has set forth."

"I hope it's not imminent."

"How do you propose to avoid it?"

"I imagine that we will radio for help, sir."

"You forget that I have destroyed the radio."

"I remember noting a crate marked 'Radio Parts' stored in the starboard jet-pod."

"I am sorry to disillusion you, Mr. Culpepper. That case is mislabeled."

OSTRANDER jumped to his feet, left the wardroom. There was the sound of moving crates. A moment of silence. Then he returned. He glared at Henry Belt. "Whiskey, Bottles of whiskey."

Henry Belt nodded. "I told you as much."

"But now we have no radio," said Lynch in an ugly voice.

We never have had a radio, Mr. Lynch. You were warned that you would have to depend on your own resources to bring us home. You have failed, and in the process doomed me as well as yourself. Incidentally, I must mark you all down ten demerits for a faulty cargo check."

"Demerits," said Ostrander in a bleak voice.

"Now, Mr. Culpepper," said Henry Belt. "What is your next proposal?"

"I don't know, sir."

Verona spoke in a placatory voice. "What would you do, sir, if you were in our position?"

Henry Belt shook his head.

"I am an imaginative man, Mr. Verona, but there are certain leaps of the mind which are beyond my powers." He returned to his compartment.

Von Gluck looked curiously at Culpepper. "It is a fact. You're not at all concerned."

"Oh, I'm concerned. But I believe that Mr. Belt wants to get home too. He's too good a spaceman not to know exactly what he's doing."

The door from Henry Belt's compartment slid back. Henry Belt stood in the opening. "Mr. Culpepper, I chanced to overhear your remark, and I now note down ten demerits against you. This attitude expresses a complacency as dangerous as Mr. Sutton's utter funk. He looked about the room. "Pay no heed to Mr. Culpepper. He is wrong. Even if I could repair this disaster, I would not raise a hand. For I expect to die in space."

CHAPTER 7

THE sail was canted vectorless, edgewise to the sun. Jupiter was a smudge astern. There were five cadets in the wardroom. Culpepper, Verona, and von Gluck sat talking in low voices. Ostrander and Lynch lay crouched, arms to knees, faces to the wall. Sutton had gone two days before. Quietly donning his space-suit he had stepped into the

exit chamber and thrust himself headlong into space. A propulsion unit gave him added speed, and before any of the cadets could intervene he was gone.

Shortly thereafter Lynch and Ostrander succumbed to inanition, a kind of despondent helplessness: manic-depression in its most stupefying phase. Culpepper the suave, Verona the pragmatic and von Gluck the sensitive, remained.

They spoke quietly to themselves, out of earshot of Henry Belt's room. "I still believe," said Culpepper, "that somehow there is a means to get ourselves out of this mess, and that Henry Belt knows it."

Verona said, "I wish I could think so. . . . We've been over it a hundred times. If we set sail for Saturn or Neptune or Uranus, the outward vector of thrust plus the outward vector of our momentum will take us far beyond Pluto before we're anywhere near. The plasma jets could stop us if we had enough energy, but the shield can't supply it and we don't have another power source. . . ."

Von Gluck hit his fist into his hand. "Gentlemen," he said in a soft delighted voice. "I believe we have sufficient energy at hand. We will use the sail. Remember? It is bellied. It can function as a mirror. It spreads five square miles of surface. Sunlight out

here is thin—but so long as we collect enough of it—”

“I understand!” said Culpepper. “We back off the hull till the reactor is at the focus of the sail and turn on the jets!”

Verona said dubiously, “We’ll still be receiving radiation pressure. And what’s worse, the jets will impinge back on the sail. Effect—cancellation. We’ll be nowhere.”

“If we cut the center out of the sail—just enough to allow the plasma through—we’d beat that objection. And as for the radiation pressure—we’ll surely do better with the plasma drive.”

“What do we use to make plasma?” We don’t have the stock.”

“Anything that can be ionized. The radio, the computer, your shoes, my shirt, Culpepper’s camera, Henry Belt’s whiskey. . . .”

CHAPTER 8

THE angel-wagon came up to meet Sail 25, in orbit beside Sail 40, which was just making ready to take out a new crew.

The cargo carrier drifted near, eased into position. Three men sprang across space to Sail 40, a few hundred yards behind 25, tossed lines back to the carrier, pulled bales of cargo and equipment across the gap.

The five cadets and Henry Belt, clad in space-suits, stepped out into the sunlight. Earth

spread below, green and blue, white and brown, the contours so precious and dear to bring tears to the eyes. The cadets transferring cargo to Sail 40 gazed at them curiously as they worked. At last they were finished, and the six men of Sail 25 boarded the carrier.

BACK safe and sound, eh Henry?” said the pilot. “Well, I’m always surprised.”

Henry Belt made no answer. The cadets stowed their cargo, and standing by the port, took a final look at Sail 25. The carrier retro-jetted; the two sails seemed to rise above them.

The lighter nosed in and out of the atmosphere, braking, extended its wings, glided to an easy landing on the Mojave Desert.

The cadets, their legs suddenly loose and weak to the unaccustomed gravity, limped after Henry Belt to the carry-all, seated themselves and were conveyed to the administration complex. They alighted from the carry-all, and now Henry Belt motioned the five to the side.

“Here, gentlemen, is where I leave you. Tonight I will check my red book and prepare my official report. But I believe I can present you an unofficial resumé of my impressions. Mr. Lynch and Mr. Ostrander, I feel that you are ill-suited either for command or for any situation

which might inflict prolonged emotional pressure upon you. I cannot recommend you for space-duty.

"Mr. von Gluck, Mr. Culpepper and Mr. Verona, all of you meet my minimum requirements for a recommendation, although I shall write the words 'Especially Recommended' only beside the names 'Clyde von Gluck' and 'Marcus Verona'. You brought the sail back to Earth by essentially faultless navigation.

"So now our association ends. I trust you have profited by it." Henry Belt nodded briefly to each of the five and limped off around the building.

The cadets looked after him. Culpepper reached in his pocket and brought forth a pair of small metal objects which he displayed in his palm. "Recognize these?"

"Hmf," said Lynch in a flat voice. "Bearings for the computer disks. The original ones."

"I found them in the little spare parts tray. They weren't there before."

Von Gluck nodded. "The machinery always seemed to fail immediately after sail check, as I recall."

"Lynch drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. He turned, strode away. Ostrander followed him. Culpepper shrugged. To Verona he gave one of the bearings, to von Gluck the other. "For souvenirs—or medals. You fellows deserve them."

"Thanks, Ed," said von Gluck.

"Thanks," muttered Verona. "I'll make a stick-pin of this thing."

The three, not able to look at each other, glanced up into the sky where the first stars of twilight were appearing, then continued on into the building where family and friends and sweethearts awaited them.

THE END

PASSION PLAY by ROGER ZELAZNY

**Every culture has its ritual festivals, rooted
in the great events of history.
Is this the form of future fertility rites?**

AT the end of the season of sorrows comes the time of rejoicing. Spring, like the hands of a well-oiled clock, noiselessly indicates this time. The average days of dimness and moisture decrease steadily in number, and those of brilliance and cool air begin to enter the calendar again. And it is good that the wet times are behind us, for they rust and corrode our machinery; they require the most intense standards of hygiene.

With all the bright baggage of Spring, the days of the Festival arrive. After the season of Lamentations come the sacred stations of the Passion, then the bright Festival of Resurrection, with its tinkle and clatter, its exhaust fumes, scorched rubber, clouds of dust, and its great promise of happiness.

We come here every year, to the place, to replicate a classic. We see with our own lenses the functioning promise of our crea-



Illustrated by SUMMERS

tion. The time is today, and I have been chosen.

Here on the sacred grounds of Le Mans I will perform every action of the classic which has been selected. Before the finale I will have duplicated every movement and every position which we know occurred. How fortunate! How high the honor!

Last year many were chosen, but it was not the same. Their level of participation was lower. Still, I had wanted so badly to be chosen! I had wished so strongly that I, too, might stand beside the track and await the flaming Mercedes.

But I was saved for this greater thing, and all lenses are upon me as we await the start. This

year there is only one Car to watch—number 4, the Ferrari-analog.

THE sign has been given, and the rubber screams; the smoke balloons like a giant cluster of white grapes, and we are moving. Another car gives way, so that I can drop into the proper position. There are many cars, but only one Car.

We scream about the turn, in this great Italian classic of two centuries ago. We run them all here, at the place, regardless of where they were held originally.

"Oh gone masters of creation," I pray, "let me do it properly. Let my timing be accurate. Let no random variable arise to destroy a perfect replication."

The dull gray metal of my arms, my delicate gyroscopes, my special gripping-hands, all hold the wheel in precisely the proper position, as we roar into the straightaway.

How wise the ancient masters were! When they knew they must destroy themselves in a combat too mystical and holy for us to understand, they left us these ceremonies, in commemoration of the Great Machine. All the data was there: the books, the films, all; for us to find, study, learn, to know the sacred Action.

As we round another turn, I think of our growing cities, our vast assembly lines, our lube-

bars, and our beloved executive computer. How great all things are! What a well-ordered day! How fine to have been chosen!

The tires, little brothers, cry out, and the pinging of small stones comes from beneath. Three-tenths of a second, and I shall depress the accelerator an eighth of an inch further.

R-7091 waves to me as I enter the second lap, but I cannot wave back. My finest functioning is called for at this time. All the special instrumentation which has been added to me will be required in a matter of seconds.

The other cars give way at precisely the right instant. I turn, I slide. I crash through the guard rail.

"Turn over now, please!" I pray, twisting the wheel, "and burn."

Suddenly we are rolling, skidding, upside-down. Smoke fills the car.

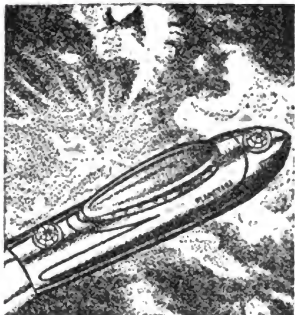
To the crashing noise that roars within my receptors, the crackle and lick of flames is now added.

My steel skeleton—collapsed beneath the impact-stresses. My lubricants—burning. My lenses, all but for a tiny area—shattered.

My hearing-mechanism still functions weakly.

Now there is a great horn sounding, and metal bodies rush across the fields.

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Now. Now is the time for me to turn off all my functions and cease.

But I will wait. Just a moment longer. I must hear them say it.

Metal arms drag me from the pyre. I am laid aside. Fire extinguishers play white rivers upon the Car.

Dimly, in the distance, through my smashed receptors, I hear the speaker rumble:

"Von Trips has smashed! The Car is dead!"

A great sound of lamenting arises from the rows of unmoving spectators. The giant fireproof van arrives on the field, just as the attendants gain control of the flames.

Four tenders leap out and raise the Car from the ground. A fifth

collects every smouldering fragment.

And I see it all!

"Oh, let this not be blasphemy, please!" I pray. "One instant more!"

Tenderly, the Car is set within the van. The great doors close.

The van moves, slowly, bearing off the dead warrior, out through the gates, up the great avenue, and past the eager crowds.

To the great smelter. The Melting Pot!

To the place where it will be melted down, then sent out, a piece used to grace the making of each new person.

A cry of unanimous rejoicing arises on the avenue.

It is enough, that I have seen all this!

Happily, I turn myself off.

THE END

The Asteroids, 2194

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Illustrated by FINLAY

One of the better paperback science fiction books recently published is John Wyndham's "The Outward Urge." The stories in it originally appeared as novelets in Amazing's sister magazine, Fantastic. Now the famed British author continues his saga of the space-going Troons with this story of a man who survived death, but was not happy about it.

MY FIRST visit to New Caledonia was in the summer of 2199. At that time an exploration party under the leadership of Gilbert Troon was cautiously pushing its way up the less radio-active parts of Italy, investigating the prospects of reclamation. My firm felt that there might be a popular book in it, and assigned me to put the prop-

osition to Gilbert. When I arrived, however, it was to find that he had been delayed, and was now expected a week later. I was not at all displeased. A few days of comfortable laziness on a Pacific island, all paid for and counting as work, is the kind of perquisite I like.

New Caledonia is a fascinating spot, and well worth the trouble



of getting a landing permit—if you can get one. It has more of the past—and more of the future, too, for that matter—than any other place, and somehow it manages to keep them almost separate.

At one time the island, and the group, were, in spite of the name, a French Colony. But in 2044, with the eclipse of Europe in the Great Northern War, it found itself, like other ex-colonies dotted all 'about the world, suddenly thrown upon its own resources. While most mainland colonies hurried to make treaties with their nearest powerful neighbors, many islands such as New Caledonia had little to offer and not much to fear, and so let things drift.

For two generations the surviving nations were far too occupied by the tasks of bringing equilibrium to a half-wrecked world to take any interest in scattered islands. It was not until the Brazilians began to see Australia as a possible challenger of their supremacy that they started a policy of unobtrusive and tactful mercantile expansion into the Pacific. Then, naturally, it occurred to the Australians, too, that it was time to begin to extend *their* economic influence over various island-groups.

The New Caledonians resisted infiltration. They had found in-

dependence congenial, and steadily rebuffed temptations by both parties. The year 2194, in which Space declared for independence, found them still resisting; but the pressure was now considerable. They had watched one group of islands after another succumb to trade preferences, and thereafter virtually slide back to colonial status, and they now found it difficult to doubt that before long the same would happen to themselves when, whatever the form of words, they would be annexed—most likely by the Australians in order to forestall the establishment of a Brazilian base there, within a thousand miles of the coast.

It was into this situation that Jayme Gonveia, speaking for Space, stepped in 2150 with a suggestion of his own. He offered the New Caledonians guaranteed independence of either big Power, a considerable quantity of cash, and a prosperous future if they would grant Space a lease of territory which would become its Earth headquarters and main terminus.

The proposition was not altogether to the New Caledonian taste, but it was better than the alternatives. They accepted, and the construction of the Space-yards was begun.

Since then the island has lived in a curious symbiosis. In the

north are the rocket landing and dispatch stages, warehouses, and engineering shops, and a way of life furnished with all modern techniques, while the other four-fifths of the island all but ignores it, and contentedly lives much as it did two and a half centuries ago. Such a state of affairs cannot be preserved by accident in this world. It is the result of careful contrivance both by the New Caledonians who like it that way, and by Space which dislikes outsiders taking too close an interest in its affairs. So, for permission to land anywhere in the group one needs hard-won visas from both authorities. The result is no exploitation by tourists or salesmen, and a scarcity of strangers.

However, there I was, with an unexpected week of leisure to put in, and no reason why I should spend it in Space-Concession territory. One of the secretaries suggested Lahua, down in the south at no great distance from Noumea, the capital, as a restful spot, so thither I went.

Lahua has picture-book charm. It is a small fishing town, half-tropical, half-French. On its wide white beach there are still canoes, working canoes, as well as modern. At one end of the curve a mole gives shelter for a small anchorage, and there the palms that fringe the rest of the shore stop to make room for the town.

Many of Lahua's houses are improved-traditional, still thatched with palm, but its heart is a cobbled rectangle surrounded by entirely untropical houses, known as the *Grande Place*. Here are shops, pavement cafés, stalls of fruit under bright striped awnings guarded by Gauguinesque women, a statue of Bougainville, an atrociously ugly church on the east side, a pissoir, and even a Mairie. The whole thing might have been imported complete from early twentieth century France, except for the inhabitants—but even they, some in bright sarongs, some in European clothes, must have looked much the same when France ruled there.

I found it difficult to believe that they are real people living real lives. For the first day I was constantly accompanied by the feeling that an unseen director would suddenly call 'Cut', and it would all come to a stop.

On the second morning I was growing more used to it. I bathed, and then with a sense that I was beginning to get the feel of the life, drifted to the *Place*, in search of an *apéritif*. I chose a café on the south side where a few trees shaded the tables, and wondered what to order. My usual drinks seemed out of key. A dusky, brightly saronged girl approached. On an impulse, and feeling like a char-

acter out of a very old novel I suggested a pernod. She took it as a matter of course.

"*Un pernod? Certainement, monsieur,*" she told me.

I sat there looking across the Square, less busy now that the *déjeuner* hour was close, wondering what Sydney and Rio, Adelaide and São Paulo had gained and lost since they had been the size of Lahua, and doubting the value of the gains whatever they might be . . .

The pernod arrived. I watched it cloud with water, and sipped it cautiously. An odd drink, scarcely calculated, I felt, to enhance the appetite. As I contemplated it a voice spoke from behind my right shoulder.

"An island product, but from the original recipe," it said. "Quite safe, in moderation, I assure you."

I turned in my chair. The speaker was seated at the next table; a well-built, compact, sandy-haired man, dressed in a spotless white suit, a panama hat with a colored band, and wearing a neatly trimmed, pointed beard. I guessed his age at about 34 though the grey eyes that met my own looked older, more experienced, and troubled.

"A taste that I have not had the opportunity to acquire," I told him. He nodded.

"You won't find it outside. In

some ways we are a museum here, but little the worse, I think, for that."

"One of the later Muses," I suggested. "The Muse of Recent History. And very fascinating, too."

I became aware that one or two men at tables within earshot were paying us—or, rather, me—some attention; their expressions were not unfriendly, but they showed what seemed to be traces of concern.

"It is—" my neighbor began to reply, and then broke off, cut short by a rumble in the sky.

I turned to see a slender white spire stabbing up into the blue overhead. Already, by the time the sound reached us, the rocket at its apex was too small to be visible. The man cocked an eye at it.

"Moon-shuttle," he observed.

"They all sound and look alike to me," I admitted.

"They wouldn't if you were inside. The acceleration in that shuttle would spread you all over the floor—very thinly," he said, and then went on: "We don't often see strangers in Lahua. Perhaps you would care to give me the pleasure of your company for luncheon? My name, by the way, is George."

I hesitated, and while I did I noticed over his shoulder an elderly man who moved his lips slightly as he gave me what was

without doubt an encouraging nod. I decided to take a chance on it.

"That's very kind of you. My name is David—David Myford, from Sydney," I told him. But he made no amplification regarding himself, so I was left still wondering whether George was his forename, or his surname.

I moved to his table, and he lifted a hand to summon the girl.

"Unless you are averse to fish you must try the bouillabaisse—*spécialité de la maison*," he told me.

I was aware that I had gained the approval of the elderly man, and apparently of some others as well, by joining George. The waitress, too, had an approving air. I wondered vaguely what was going on, and whether I had been let in for the town bore, to protect the rest.

"From Sydney," he said reflectively. "It's a long time since I saw Sydney. I don't suppose I'd know it now."

"It keeps on growing," I admitted, "but Nature would always prevent you from confusing it with anywhere else."

We went on chatting. The bouillabaisse arrived; and excellent it was. There were hunks of first-class bread, too, cut from those long loaves you see in pictures in old European books. I

began to feel, with the help of the local wine, that a lot could be said for the twentieth century way of living.

In the course of our talk it emerged that George had been a rocket pilot, but was grounded now—not, one would judge, for reasons of health, so I did not inquire further . . .

The second course was an excellent *coupe* of fruits I never heard of, and, overall, iced passion-fruit juice. It was when the coffee came that he said, rather wistfully I thought:

"I had hoped you might be able to help me, Mr. Myford, but it now seems to me that you are not a man of faith."

"Surely everyone has to be very much a man of faith," I protested. "For everything a man cannot do for himself he has to have faith in others."

"True," he conceded. "I should have said 'spiritual faith'. You do not speak as one who is interested in the nature and destiny of his soul—nor of anyone else's soul—I fear?"

I felt that I perceived what was coming next. However, if he was interested in saving my soul he had at least begun the operation by looking after my bodily needs with a generously good meal.

"When I was young," I told him, "I used to worry quite a lot about my soul, but later I decid-

ed that that was largely a matter of vanity."

"There is also vanity in thinking oneself self-sufficient," he said.

"Certainly," I agreed. "It is chiefly with the conception of the soul as a separate entity that I find myself out of sympathy. For me it is a manifestation of mind which is, in its turn, a product of the brain, modified by the external environment, and influenced more directly by the glands."

He looked saddened, and shook his head reprovingly.

"You are so wrong—so very wrong. Some are always conscious of their souls, others, like yourself, are unaware of them, but no one knows the true value of his soul as long as he has it. It is not until a man has lost his soul that he understands its value."

It was not an observation making for easy rejoinder, so I let the silence between us continue. Presently he looked up into the northern sky where the trail of the moon-bound shuttle had long since blown away. With embarrassment I observed two large tears flow from the inner corners of his eyes and trickle down beside his nose. He, however, showed no embarrassment; he simply pulled out a large, white, beautifully laundered handkerchief, and dealt with them.

"I hope you will never learn what a dreadful thing it is to have no soul," he told me, with a shake of his head. "It is to hold the emptiness of space in one's heart: to sit by the waters of Babylon for the rest of one's life."

Lamely I said:

"I'm afraid this is out of my range. I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. No one understands. But always one keeps on hoping that one day there will come somebody who does understand, and can help."

"But the soul is a manifestation of the self," I said. "I don't see how that *can* be lost—it can be changed, perhaps, but not lost."

"Mine is," he said, still looking up into the vasty blue. "Lost—adrift somewhere out there . . . Without it I am a sham . . . A man who has lost a leg or an arm is still a man, but a man who has lost his soul is nothing—nothing—nothing . . ."

"Perhaps a psychiatrist—" I started to suggest, uncertainly.

That stirred him, and checked the tears.

"Psychiatrist!" he exclaimed scornfully. "Damned frauds! Even to the word. They may know a bit about minds; but about the psyche!—why they even deny its existence . . . !"

There was a pause.

"I wish I could help. . . ."

"There was a chance. You *might* have been one who could. There's always the chance. . . ." he said consolingly, though whether he was consoling himself, or me, seemed moot. At this point the church clock struck two. My host's mood changed. He got up quite briskly.

"I have to go now," he told me. "I wish you had been the one, but it has been a pleasant encounter all the same. I hope you enjoy Lahua."

I watched him make his way along the *Place*. At one stall he paused, selected a peach-like fruit, and bit into it. The woman beamed at him amiably, apparently unconcerned about payment.

The dusky waitress arrived by my table, and stood looking after him.

"O, *le pauvre monsieur Georges*," she said, sadly. We watched him climb the church steps, throw away the remnant of his fruit, and remove his hat to enter. "*Il va faire la prière*," she explained. "*Tous les jours* 'e make pray for 'is soul. In ze morning, in ze afternoon. *C'est si triste*."

I noticed the bill in her hand. I fear that for a moment I misjudged George, but it had been a good lunch. I reached for my notecase. The girl noticed, and shook her head.

"Non, non, monsieur, non. Vous êtes convive. C'est d'accord. Alors, monsieur Georges 'e sign bill tomorrow. *S'arrange*. C'est okay," she insisted, and stuck to it.

The elderly man whom I had noticed before broke in:

"It's all right—quite in order," he assured me. Then he added: "Perhaps if you are not in a hurry you would care to take a café cognac with me?"

There seemed to be a fine open-handedness about Lahua. I accepted, and joined him.

"I'm afraid no one can have briefed you about poor George," he said.

I admitted this was so. He shook his head in reproof of persons unknown, and added:

"Never mind. All went well. George always has hopes of a stranger, you see: sometimes one has been known to laugh. One doesn't like that."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told him. "His state strikes me as very far from funny."

"It is indeed," he agreed. "But he's improving. I doubt whether he knows it himself, but he is. A year ago he would often weep quietly through the whole *déjeuner*.—Rather depressing until one got used to it."

"He lives here in Lahua, then?" I asked.

"He exists. He spends most of

his time in the church. For the rest he wanders round. He sleeps at that big white house up on the hill. His grand-daughter's place. She sees that he's decently turned out, and pays the bills for whatever he fancies down here."

I thought I must have misheard.

"His grand-daughter!" I exclaimed. "But he's a young man. He can't be much over thirty years old . . ."

He looked at me.

"You'll very likely come across him again. Just as well to know how things stand. Of course it isn't the sort of thing the family likes to publicize, but there's no secret about it."

The café-cognacs arrived. He added cream to his, and began:

About five years ago (he said), yes, it would be in 2194. young Gerald Troon was taking a ship out to one of the larger asteroids—the one that de Gasparis called *Psyche* when he spotted it in 1852. The ship was a space-built freighter called the *Celestis*, working from the moon-base. Her crew was five, with not bad accommodation forward. Apart from that and the motor-section these ships are not much more than one big hold which is very often empty on the outward journeys unless it is carrying gear to set up new workings. This time it was empty because

the assignment was simply to pick up a load of uranium ore—*Psyche* is half-made of high-yield ore, and all that was necessary was to set going the digging machinery already on the site. and load the stuff in. It seemed simple enough.

But the Asteroid Belt is still a very tricky area, you know. The main bodies and groups are charted, of course—but that only helps you to find them. The place is full of outliers of all sizes that you couldn't hope to chart, but have to avoid. About the best you can do is to tackle the Belt as near to your objective as possible, reduce speed until you are little more than local orbit velocity, and then edge your way in, going very canny. The trouble is the time it can take to keep on fiddling along that way for thousands—hundreds of thousands, maybe—of miles. Fellows get bored and inattentive, or sick to death of it and start to take chances. I don't know what the answer is. You can bounce radar off the big chunks and hitch that up to a course deflector to keep you away from them. But the small stuff is just as deadly to a ship, and there's so much of it about that if you were to make the course-deflector sensitive enough to react to it you'd have your ship shying off everything the whole time, and getting nowhere. What we want is some-

one to come up with a kind of repulse mechanism with only a limited range of operation—say, a hundred miles—but no one does. So, as I say, it's tricky. Since they first started to tackle it back in 2150 they've lost half-a-dozen ships in there, and had a dozen more damaged one way or another. Not a nice place at all . . . On the other hand, uranium is uranium . . .

Gerald's a good lad though. He has the authentic Troon yen for space without being much of a chancer; besides, *Psyche* isn't too far from the inner rim of the orbit—not nearly the approach problem *Ceres* is, for instance—what's more, he'd done it several times before.

Well, he got into the Belt, and jockeyed and fiddled and niggled his way until he was about three hundred miles out from *Psyche* and getting ready to come in. Perhaps he'd got a bit careless by then; in any case he'd not be expecting to find anything in orbit around the asteroid. But that's just what he did find—the hard way . . .

There was a crash which made the whole ship ring round him and his crew as if they were in an enormous bell. It's about the nastiest—and very likely to be the last—sound a spaceman can ever hear. This time, however, their luck was in. It wasn't too

bad. They discovered that as they crowded to watch the indicator dials. It was soon evident that nothing vital had been hit, and they were able to release their held breaths.

Gerald turned over the controls to his First, and he and the engineer, Steve, pulled space-suits out of the locker. When the airlock opened they hitched their safety-lines on the spring hooks, and slid their way aft along the hull on magnetic soles. It was soon clear that the damage was not on the airlock side, and they worked round the curve of the hull.

One thing was evident right away—that it had hit with no great force. If it had, it would have gone right through and out the other side, for the hold of a freighter is little more than a single-walled cylinder: there is no need for it to be more, it doesn't have to conserve warmth, nor contain air, nor to resist the friction of an atmosphere, nor does it have to contend with any more gravitational pull than that of the moon; it is only in the living-quarters that there have to be the complexities necessary to sustain life.

Another, which was immediately clear, was that this was not the only misadventure that had befallen the small ship. Something had, at some time, sliced off most of its after part, carry-

ing away not only the driving tubes but the mixing-chambers as well, and leaving it hopelessly disabled.

Shuffling round the wreckage to inspect it, Gerald found no entrance. It was thoroughly jammed into the hole it had made, and its airlock must lie forward, somewhere inside the freighter. He sent Steve back for a cutter and for a key that would get them into the hold. While he waited he spoke through his helmet radio to the operator in the *Celestis's* living-quarters, and explained the situation. He added:

"Can you raise the moon-station just now, Jake? I'd better make a report."

"Strong and clear, Cap'n."

"Good. Tell them to put me on to the Duty Officer, will you."

He heard Jake open up and call. There was a pause while the waves crossed and recrossed the millions of miles between them, then a voice:

"Hullo *Celestis*! Hullo *Celestis*! Moon-station responding. Go ahead, Jake. Over!"

Gerald waited out the exchange patiently. Radio waves are some of the things that can't be hurried. In due course another voice spoke.

"Hullo *Celestis*! Moon-station Duty Officer speaking. Give your location and go ahead."

"Hullo Charles. This is Gerald Troon calling from *Celestis* now in orbit about *Psyche*. Approximately three-twenty miles altitude. I am notifying damage by collision. No harm to personnel. *Not repeat not in danger*. Damage appears to be confined to empty hold-section. Cause of damage . . ." He went on to give particulars, and concluded: "I am about to investigate. Will report further. Please keep the link open. Over!"

The engineer returned, floating a self-powered cutter with him on a short safety-cord, and holding the key which would screw back the bolts of the hold's entrance-port. Gerald took the key, inserted it in the hole beside the door, and inserted his legs into the two staples that would give him the purchase to wind it.

The moon man's voice came again.

"Hullo, Ticker. Understand no immediate danger. But don't go taking any chances, boy. Can you identify the derelict?"

"Repeat no danger," Troon told him. "Plumb lucky. If she'd hit six feet further forward we'd have had real trouble. I have now opened small door of the hold, and am going in to examine the forepart of the derelict. Will try to identify it."

The cavernous darkness of the hold made it necessary for them

to switch on their helmet lights. They could now see the front part of the derelict; it took up about half the space there was. The ship had punched through the wall, turning back the tough alloy in curled petals, as though it had been tinplate. She had come to rest with her nose a bare couple of feet short of the opposite side. The two of them surveyed her for some moments. Steve pointed to a ragged hole, some five or six inches across, about halfway along the embedded section. It had a nasty significance that caused Gerald to nod sombrely.

He shuffled to the ship, and on to its curving side. He found the airlock on the top, as it lay in the *Celestis*, and tried the winding key. He pulled it out again.

"Calling you, Charles," he said. "No identifying marks on the derelict. She's not space-built—that is, she could be used in atmosphere. Oldish pattern—well, must be—she's pre the standardization of winding keys, so that takes us back a bit. Maximum external diameter, say, twelve feet. Length unknown—can't say how much after part there was before it was knocked off. She's been holed forward, too. Looks like a small meteorite, about five inches. At speed, I'd say. Just a minute . . . Yes,

clean through and out, with a pretty small exit hole. Can't open the airlock without making a new key. Quicker to cut our way in. Over!"

He shuffled back, and played his light through the small meteor hole. His helmet prevented him getting his face close enough to see anything but a small part of the opposite wall, with a corresponding hole in it.

"Easiest way is to enlarge this, Steve," he suggested.

The engineer nodded. He brought his cutter to bear, switched it on and began to carve from the edge of the hole.

"Not much good, Ticker," came the voice from the moon. "The bit you gave could apply to any one of four ships."

"Patience, dear Charles, while Steve does his bit of fancywork with the cutter," Troon told him.

It took twenty minutes to complete the cut through the double hull. Steve switched off, gave a tug with his left hand, and the joined, inner and outer, circles of metal floated away.

"*Celestis* calling moon. I am about to go into the derelict, Charles. Keep open," Troon said.

He bent down, took hold of the sides of the cut, kicked his magnetic soles free of contact, and gave a light pull which took him floating head-first through the hole in the manner of an underwater swimmer. Presently his

voice came again, with a different tone:

"I say, Charles, there are three men in here. All in spacesuits—old-time spacesuits. Two of them are belted on to their bunks. The other one is . . . Oh, his leg's gone. The meteorite must have taken it off . . . There's a queer—Oh God, it's his blood frozen into a solid ball . . . !"

After a minute or so he went on:

"I've found the log. Can't handle it in these gloves, though. I'll take it aboard, and let you have particulars. The two fellows on the bunks seem to be quite intact—their suits, I mean. Their helmets have those curved strip-windows so I can't see much of their faces. Must've—That's odd . . . Each of them has a sort of little book attached by a wire to the suit fastener. On the cover it has: 'Danger—Perigoso' in red, and underneath: 'Do not remove suit—Read instructions within', repeated in Portuguese. Then: 'Hapson Survival System'. What would all that mean, Charles? Over!"

While he waited for the reply Gerald clumsily fingered one of the tag-like books and discovered that it opened concertina-wise, a series of small metal plates hinged together printed on one side in English and on the other in Portuguese. The first

leaf carried little print, but what there was, was striking. It ran: "CAUTION! Do NOT open suit until you have read these instructions or you will KILL the wearer."

When he had got that far the Duty Officer's voice came in again:

"Hullo, Ticker. I've called the Doc. He says do NOT, repeat NOT, touch the two men on any account. Hang on, he's coming to talk to you. He says the Hapson system was scrapped over thirty years ago. He—oh, here he is . . ."

Another voice came in:

"Ticker? Laysall here. Charles tells me you've found a couple of Hapsons, undamaged. Please confirm and give circumstances."

Troon did so. In due course the doctor came back:

"Okay. That sounds fine. Now listen carefully, Ticker. From what you say it's practically certain those two are not dead—yet. They're—well, they're in cold storage. That part of the Hapson system was good. You'll see a kind of boss mounted on the left of the chest. The thing to do in the case of extreme emergency was to slap it good and hard. When you do that it gives a multiple injection. Part of the stuff puts you out. Part of it prevents the building-up in the body of large ice crystals that would damage the tissues.

Part of it—oh, well, that'll do later. The point is that it works practically a hundred per cent. You get Nature's own deep-freeze in Space. And if there's something to keep off direct radiation from the sun you'll stay like that until somebody finds you—if anyone ever does. Now I take it that these two have been in the dark in an airless ship which is now in the airless hold of your ship. Is that right?"

"That's so, Doc. There are the two small meteorite holes, but they would not get direct beams from there."

"Fine. Then keep 'em just like that. Take care they don't get warmed. Don't try anything the instruction-sheet says. The point is that though the success of the Hapson freeze is almost sure, the resuscitation isn't. In fact it's very dodgy indeed—a poorer than twenty-five per cent chance at best. You get lethal crystal formations building up, for one thing. What I suggest is that you try to get 'em back exactly as they are. Our apparatus here will give them the best chance they can have. Can you do that?"

Gerald Troon thought for a moment. Then he said:

"We don't want to waste this trip—and that's what'll happen if we pull the derelict out of our side to leave a hole we can't mend. But if we leave her where she is, plugging the hole, we can

at least take on a half-load of ore. And if we pack that well in, it'll help to wedge the derelict in place. So suppose we leave the derelict just as she lies, and the men, too, and seal her up to keep the ore out of her. Would that suit?"

"That should be as good as can be done," the doctor replied. "But have a look at the two men before you leave them. Make sure they're secure in their bunks. As long as they are kept in space conditions about the only thing likely to harm them is breaking loose under acceleration, and getting damaged."

"Very well, that's what we'll do. Anyway, we won't be using any high acceleration the way things are. The other poor fellow shall have a proper space-burial . . ."

An hour later both Gerald and his companion were back in the *Celestis's* living-quarters, and the First Officer was starting to maneuver for the spiral-in to *Psyche*. The two got out of their spacesuits. Gerald pulled the derelict's log from the outside pocket, and took it to his bunk. There he fastened the belt, and opened the book.

Five minutes later Steve looked across at him from the opposite bunk, with concern.

"Anything the matter, Cap'n? You're looking a bit queer."

"I'm feeling a bit queer, Steve . . . That chap we took out and consigned to space, he was Terence Rice, wasn't he?"

"That's what his disc said," Steve agreed.

"H'm." Gerald Troon paused. Then he tapped the book. "This," he said, "is the log of the *Astarte*. She sailed from the moon-station third of January, 2149—forty-five years ago—bound for the Asteroid Belt. There was a crew of three: Captain George Montgomery Troon, engineer Luis Gompez, radio-man Terence Rice . . .

"So, as the unlucky one was Terence Rice, it follows that one of those two back there must be Gompez, and the other—well, he must be George Montgomery Troon, the one who made the Venus landing in 2144 . . . And, incidentally, my grandfather . . ."

"Well," said my companion, "they got them back all right. Gompez was unlucky, though—at least I suppose you'd call it unlucky—anyway, he didn't come through the resuscitation. George did, of course . . .

"But there's more to resuscitation than mere revival. There's a degree of physical shock in any case, and when you've been under as long as he had there's plenty of mental shock, too.

"He went under, a youngish

man with a young family; he woke up to find himself a great-grandfather; his wife a very old lady who had remarried; his friends gone, or elderly; his two companions in the *Astarte*, dead.

"That was bad enough, but worse still was that he knew all about the Hapson System. He knew that when you go into a deep-freeze the whole metabolism comes quickly to a complete stop. You are, by every known definition and test, dead . . . Corruption cannot set in, of course, but every vital process has stopped; every single feature which we regard as evidence of life has ceased to exist . . .

"So you are dead . . .

"So if you believe, as George does, that your psyche, your soul, has independent existence, then it must have left your body when you died.

"And how do you get it back? That's what George wants to know—what he keeps searching for. That's why he's over there now, praying to be told . . ."

I leant back in my chair, looking across the *Place* at the dark opening of the church door.

"You mean to say that that young man, that George who was here just now, is the very same George Montgomery Troon who made the first landing on Venus, half a century ago?" I said.

"He's the man," he affirmed.

I shook my head, not for disbelief, but for George's sake.

"What will happen to him?" I asked.

"God knows," said my neighbor. "He is getting better; he's less distressed than he was. And now he's beginning to show

touches of the real Troon obsession to get into space again.

"But what then? . . . You can't ship a Troon as crew. And you can't have a Captain who might take it into his head to go hunting through Space for his soul. . . .

THE END

The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista

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Today's house-hunter has only minor problems: the schools, the taxes, the neighbors, the mortgage. But in a world of psychotropic houses—where the very walls respond to the emotions of those who live (and lived) in them—buying the right house can be a matter of life and death.

NO-ONE ever comes to Vermilion Sands now, and I suppose there are few people who have even heard of it, but ten years ago, when Fay and I first went to live at 99 Stellavista, just





before our marriage broke up, the colony was still remembered as the one-time playground of movie czars, delinquent heiresses and eccentric cosmopolites in those fabulous years before the Recess. Admittedly most of the abstract villas and fake palazzos were empty, their huge gardens overgrown, two-level swimming pools long drained, and the whole place was degenerating like an abandoned amusement park, but there was enough bizarre extravagance in the air to make one realize that the giants had only just departed.

I remember the day we first drove down Stellavista in the property agent's car, and how exhilarated Fay and I were, despite our bogus front of bourgeois respectability. Fay, I think, was even a little awed—one or two of the big names were living on behind the shuttered terraces—and we must have been the easiest prospects the young agent had seen for months.

Presumably this was why he tried to work off the really weird places first. The half dozen we saw to begin with were obviously the old regulars, faithfully paraded in the hope that some unwary client might be staggered into buying one of them, or failing that, temporarily lose all standards of comparison and take the first tolerably conventional pile to come along.

One, just off Stellavista and M, would have shaken even an old-guard surrealist on a heroin swing. Screened from the road by a mass of dusty rhododendrons, it consisted of six huge aluminium-shelled spheres suspended like the elements of a mobile from an enormous concrete davit. The largest sphere contained the lounge, the others, successively smaller and spiralling upward into the air, the bedrooms and kitchen. Many of the hull plates had been holed, and the entire slightly tarnished structure hung down into the weeds poking through the cracked concrete court like a collection of forgotten space-ships in a vacant lot.

STAMERS, the agent, left us sitting in the car, partly shielded by the rhododendrons, ran across to the entrance and switched the place on (all the houses in Vermilion Sands, it goes without saying, were psychotropic). There was a dim whirring, and the spheres tipped and began to rotate, brushing against the undergrowth.

Fay sat in the car, staring up in amazement at this awful, beautiful thing, but out of curiosity I got out and walked over to the entrance, the main sphere slowing as I approached, uncertainly steering a course toward me, the smaller ones following.

According to the descriptive brochure, the house had been built eight years earlier for a TV mogul as a weekend retreat. The pedigree was a long one, through two movie starlets, a psychiatrist, an ultrasonic composer (the late Dmitri Shochmann—a notorious madman, I remembered that he invited a score of guests to his suicide party, but no-one had turned up to watch. Chagrined, he bungled the attempt) and an automobile stylist. With such an overlay of more or less blue-chip responses built into it, the house should have been snapped up within a week, even in Vermilion Sands; to have been on the market for several months, if not years, indicated that the previous tenants had been none too happy there.

Ten feet from me, the main sphere hovered uncertainly, the entrance extending downwards. Stammers stood in the open doorway, smiling encouragingly, but the house seemed nervous of something. As I stepped forward it suddenly jerked away, almost in alarm, the entrance retracting and sending a low shudder through the rest of the spheres.

It's always interesting to watch a psychotropic house try to adjust itself to strangers, particularly those at all guarded or suspicious. The responses vary, a blend of past reactions to nega-

tive emotions, the hostility of the previous tenants, a traumatic encounter with a bailiff or burglar (though both these usually stay well away from PT houses; the dangers of an inverting balcony or the sudden deflation of a corridor are too great). The initial reaction can be a surer indication of a house's true condition than any amount of sales talk about horse-power and moduli of elasticity.

THIS one was definitely on the defensive. When I climbed up onto the entrance Stammers was fiddling desperately with the control console recessed into the wall behind the door, damping the volume down as low as possible. Usually a property agent will select medium/full, trying to heighten the PT responses.

He smiled thinly at me. "Circuits are a little worn. Nothing serious, we'll replace them on contract. Some of the previous owners were show business people, had an over-simplified view of the full life."

I nodded, walking through onto the balcony which ringed the wide sunken lounge. It was a beautiful room all right, with opaque plastex walls and white fluo-glass ceiling, but something terrible had happened there. As it responded to me, the ceiling lifting slightly and the walls growing less opaque, reflecting

my perspective-seeking eye, I noticed that curious mottled knots were forming, indicating where the room had been strained and healed faultily. Deep hidden rifts began to distort the sphere, ballooning out one of the alcoves like a bubble of over-extended gum.

Stamers tapped my elbow.

"Lively responses, aren't they, Mr. Talbot?" He put his hand on the wall behind us. The plastex swam and whirled like boiling toothpaste, then extruded itself into a small ledge. Stamers sat down on the lip, which quickly expanded to match the contours of his body, providing back and arm rests. "Sit down and relax, Mr. Talbot, let yourself feel at home here."

The seat cushioned up around me like an enormous white hand, and immediately the walls and ceiling quietened—obviously Stamers' first job was to get his clients off their feet before their restless shuffling could do any damage. Someone living there must have put in a lot of anguished pacing and knuckle-cracking.

OF course, you're getting nothing but custom-built units here," Stamers said. "The vinyl chains in this plastex were hand-crafted literally molecule by molecule."

I felt the room shift around

me. The ceiling was dilating and contracting in steady pulses, an absurdly exaggerated response to our own respiratory rhythms, but the motions were overlayed by sharp transverse spasms, feed-back from some cardiac ailment.

The house was not only frightened of us, it was seriously ill. Somebody, Dmitri Shochmann perhaps, overflowing with self-hate, had committed an appalling injury to himself, and the house was recapitulating its previous response. I was about to ask Stamers if the suicide party had been staged here when he sat up and looked around fretfully.

At the same time my ears started to sing. Mysteriously, the air pressure inside the lounge was building up, gusts of old grit whirling out into the hallway towards the exit.

Stamers was on his feet, the seat telescoping back into the wall.

"Er, Mr. Talbot, let's stroll around the garden, give you the feel of—"

He broke off, face creased in alarm. The ceiling was only five feet above our heads, contracting like a huge white bladder.

"—explosive decompression," Stamers finished automatically, taking my arm quickly. "I don't understand this," he muttered as we ran out into the hallway, the air whooshing past us.

I had a shrewd idea what was happening, and sure enough we found Fay peering into the control console, swinging the volume tabs.

Stamers dived past her. We were almost dragged back into the lounge as the ceiling began its outward leg and sucked the air in through the doorway, but just in time he reached the emergency panel and switched the house off.

Wide-eyed, he buttoned his shirt up, nodding to Fay. "That was close, Mrs. Talbot, that was really close." He gave a light hysterical laugh.

As we walked back to the car, the giant spheres resting among the weeds, he said: "Well, Mr. Talbot, it's a fine property. A remarkable pedigree for a house only eight years old. An exciting challenge, you know, a new dimension in living."

I gave him a weak smile. "Maybe, but it's not exactly *us*, is it?"

WE had come to Vermilion Sands for two years, while I opened a law office in downtown Red Beach twenty miles away. Apart from the dust, smog and inflationary prices of real estate in Red Beach, a strong motive for coming out to Vermilion Sands was that any number of potential clients were mouldering away there in the

old mansions—forgotten movie queens, lonely impresarios and the like, some of the most litigious people in the world. Once installed, I could make my rounds of the bridge tables and dinner parties, tactfully stimulating a little righteous will-paring and contract-breaking.

However, as we drove down Stellavista on our inspection tour I wondered if we'd find anywhere suitable. Rapidly we went through a mock Assyrian ziggurat (the last owner had suffered from St. Vitus's Dance, and the whole structure still jittered like a galvanized Tower of Pisa), and a converted submarine pen (here the problem had been alcoholism, we could *feel* the gloom and helplessness come down off those huge damp walls soaring up into the darkness).

Finally Stamers gave up and brought us back to earth. Unfortunately his more conventional properties were little better. The real trouble was that most of Vermilion Sands is composed of early, or primitive-fantastic, period psychotropic, when the possibilities offered by the new bioplastic medium rather went to architects' heads. It was some years before a compromise was reached between the 100% responsive structure and the rigid non-responsive houses of the past. The first PT houses had so many senso-cells distributed over

them, echoing every shift of mood and position of the occupants, that living in one was like inhabiting someone else's brain.

UNLUCKILY bioplastics need a lot of exercise or they grow rigid and crack, and many people believe that PT buildings are still given unnecessarily subtle memories and are far too sensitive—there's the apocryphal story of the millionaire of plebian origins who was literally frozen out of a million-dollar mansion he had bought from an aristocratic family. The place had been trained to respond to their habitual rudeness and bad temper, and reacted discordantly when re-adjusting itself to the millionaire, unintentionally parodying his soft-spoken politeness.

But although the echoes of previous tenants can be intrusive, this naturally has its advantages. Many medium-priced PT homes resonate with the by-gone laughter of happy families, the relaxed harmony of a successful marriage. It was something like this that I wanted for Fay and myself. In the previous year our relationship had begun to fade a little, and a really well-integrated house with a healthy set of reflexes—say, those of a prosperous bank president and his devoted spouse—would go a long way towards healing the rifts between us.

Leafing through the brochures when we reached the end of Stellavista I could see that domesticated bank presidents had been in short supply at Vermilion Sands. The pedigrees were either packed with ulcer-ridden, quadri-divorced TV executives, or discreetly blank.

99 Stellavista was in the latter category. As we climbed out of the car and walked up the short drive I searched the pedigree for data on the past tenants, but only the original owner was given: a Miss Emma Slack, psychic orientation unstated.

That it was a woman's house was obvious. Shaped like an enormous orchid, it was set back on a low concrete dais in the center of a trim blue gravel court, the white plastex wings, which carried the lounge on one side and the master bedroom on the other, spanning out across the magnolias on the far side of the drive. Between the two wings, on the first floor, was an open terrace around a small heart-shaped swim-pool. The terrace ran back to the central bulb, a three-story segment containing the chauffeur's apartment and a vast two-decker kitchen.

The house seemed to be in good condition. While we parked I looked up at the white wings fanning out above us, and the plastex was unscarred, its thin

seams running smoothly to the far rim like the veins of a giant leaf.

Curiously, Stammers was in no hurry to switch on. He pointed to left and right as we made our way up the glass staircase to the terrace, underlining various attractive features, but made no effort to find the control console, and I suspected that the house might be a static conversion—a fair number of PT houses are frozen in one or other position at the end of their working lives, and make tolerable static homes.

"It's not bad," I admitted, looking out across the powder-blue water as Stammers piled on the superlatives. Through the glass bottom of the pool the car parked below loomed like a colored whale asleep on the ocean bed. "This is the sort of thing, all right. But what about switching it on?"

Stammers stepped around me and headed off after Fay. "You'll want to see the kitchen first, Mr. Talbot. There's no hurry, let yourself feel at home here."

THE kitchen was fabulous, banks of gleaming control panels and auto units. Everything was recessed and stylized, blending into the over-all color scheme, complex gadgets folding back into self-sealing cabinets. Boiling an egg there would have taken me a couple of days.

"Quite a plant," I commented. Fay wandered around in a daze of delight, automatically fingering the chrome. "Looks as if it's tooled up to produce penicillin." I tapped the brochure. "But why so cheap? At 25 thousand it's damn nearly being given away."

Stammers eyes brightened. He flashed me a broad conspiratorial smile which indicated that this was *my* year, *my* day. Taking me off on a tour of the rumpus room and library, he began to hammer home the merits of the house, extolling his company's 35-year easy-purchase plan (they wanted anything except cash—there was no money in that) and the beauty and simplicity of the garden (mostly flexible polyurethane perennials).

Finally, apparently convinced that I was sold, he switched the house on.

WELL, I didn't know then what it was, but something strange had taken place in that house. Emma Slack had certainly been a woman with a powerful and oblique personality. As I walked slowly around the empty lounge, feeling the walls angle and edge away, doorways widen when I approached, curious echoes stirred through the memories embedded in the house. The responses were undefined, but somehow eerie and unsettling, like being continually watched

over one's shoulder, each room adjusting itself to my soft random footsteps as if they contained the possibility of some explosive burst of passion or temperament.

Inclining my head, however, I seemed to hear other echoes, delicate and feminine, a graceful swirl of movement reflected in a brief fluid sweep in one corner, the decorous unfolding of an archway or recess.

Then, abruptly, the mood would invert, and the hollow eeriness return.

Fay touched my arm. "Howard, it's strange."

I shrugged. "Interesting, though. Remember, our own responses will overlay these within a few days."

Fay shook her head. "I couldn't stand it, Howard. Mr. Stammers must have something normal."

"Darling, Vermilion Sands is Vermilion Sands. Don't expect to find the suburban norms. People here were individualists."

I looked down at Fay. Her small oval face, with its childlike mouth and chin, the fringe of blond hair and pert nose, seemed lost and anxious, and I realized that Fay was just a suburban housewife who felt out of place trying to live up to the exotic flora of Vermilion Sands.

I put my arm around her shoulder. "O.K., sweetie, you're

quite right. Let's find somewhere we can put our feet up and relax, be ourselves. Now, what are we going to say to Stammers?"

SURPRISINGLY, Stammers didn't seem all that disappointed. When I shook my head he put up a token protest but soon gave in and switched off the house.

"I know how Mrs. Talbot feels," he conceded as we went down the staircase. "Some of these places have got too much personality built into them. Living with someone like Gloria Tremayne isn't too easy."

I stopped, two steps from the bottom, a curious ripple of recognition running through my mind.

"Gloria Tremayne? I thought the only owner was a Miss Emma Slack."

Stammers nodded. "Yeah. Gloria Tremayne. Emma Slack was her real name. Don't say I told you, though everybody living around here knows it. We keep it quiet as long as we can. If we said Gloria Tremayne no-one would even look at the place."

"Gloria Tremayne," Fay repeated, puzzled. "She was the movie star who shot her husband, wasn't she? He was a famous architect—Howard, weren't you on that case?"

As Fay's voice chattered on I turned and looked up the stair-

case towards the sun-lounge, my mind casting itself back ten years to one of the most famous trials of the decade, whose course and verdict were as much as anything else to mark the end of a whole generation, and show up the irresponsibilities of the world before the Recess. Even though Gloria Tremayne had been acquitted, everyone knew that she had cold-bloodedly murdered her husband, the architect Miles Vanden Starr, as he lay asleep, and only the silver-tongued pleading of Daniel Hammett, her defense attorney, assisted by a young man called Howard Talbot, had saved her.

I said to Fay: "Yes, I helped to defend her. It seems a long time ago. Angel, you wait in the car. I want to check something."

Before she could follow me I ran up the staircase onto the terrace and closed the glass double doors behind me. Inert and unresponsive now, the white walls rose into the sky on either side of the pool. The water was motionless, a transparent block of condensed time, through which I could see the drowned images of Fay and Stammers sitting in the car, for a moment, as I thought of Gloria Tremayne, like an embalmed fragment of my future.

FOR three weeks, during her trial ten years earlier, I sat only a few feet from Gloria Tre-

mayne, and like everyone else in that crowded courtroom I would never forget her cool mask-like face, the composed eyes that examined each of the witnesses as they gave their testimony—chauffeur, police surgeon, neighbors who heard the shots—like a brilliant spider arraigned by its victims, never once showing any emotion or response. As they dismembered her web, skein by skein, she sat impassively at its center, giving Hammett no encouragement, content to repose in the image of herself ("The Ice Face") projected across the globe for the previous 15 years.

Perhaps in the end this saved her, the jury unable to outstare the enigma. To be honest, by the last week of the trial I had lost all interest in it. As I steered Hammett through his brief, opening and shutting his red wooden suitcase (the Hammett hallmark, it was an excellent jury distractor) whenever he indicated, my attention was fixed completely on Gloria Tremayne, trying to find some flaw in the mask through which I could glimpse her personality. I suppose that I was just another naive young man who had fallen in love with a myth manufactured by a thousand publicity agents, but for me the sensation was the real thing, and when she was acquitted the world began to revolve again.

That justice had been flouted mattered nothing. Hammett, curiously, believed her innocent. Like many successful lawyers he had based his career on the principle of prosecuting the guilty and defending the innocent—this way he was sure of a sufficiently high proportion of successes to give him a reputation for being brilliant and unbeatable. When he defended Gloria Tremayne most lawyers thought he had been tempted to depart from principle by a fat bribe from her studio, but in fact he volunteered to take the case. Perhaps he, too, was working off a secret infatuation.

Of course, I never saw her again. As soon as her next picture had been safely released her studio dropped her. Later she briefly reappeared on a narcotics charge after a car smash, and then disappeared into a limbo of alcoholics hospitals and psychowards. When she died five years afterwards few newspapers gave her more than a couple of lines.

BELOW, Stammers sounded the horn. Leisurely I retraced my way through the lounge and bedrooms, scanning the empty floors, running my hands over the smooth plastex walls, bracing myself to feel again the impact of Gloria Tremayne's personality. Blissfully, her presence would be everywhere in the

house, a thousand echoes of her distilled into every matrix and senso-cell, each moment of emotion blended into a replica of her more intimate than anyone, apart from her dead husband, could ever know. The Gloria Tremayne with whom I had become infatuated had ceased to exist, but this house was the shrine that entombed the very signatures of her soul.

TO begin with everything went quietly. Fay remonstrated with me, but I promised her a new mink wrap out of the savings we made on the house. Secondly, I was careful to keep the volume down for the first few weeks, so that there would be no clash of feminine wills—one major problem of psychotropic houses is that after several months one has to increase the volume to get the same image of the last owner, and this increases the sensitivity of the memory cells and their rate of contamination. At the same time, magnifying the psychic underlay emphasizes the cruder emotional ground-base, one begins to taste the lees rather than the distilled cream of the previous tenancy. I wanted to savor the quintessence of Gloria Tremayne as long as possible so I deliberately rationed myself, turning the volume down during the day while I was out, then switching on only

those rooms in which I sat in the evenings.

Right from the outset I was neglecting Fay. Not only were we both preoccupied with the usual problems of psychic adjustment faced by every married couple moving into a new house—undressing in the master bedroom that first night was a positive honeymoon debut all over again—but I was completely immersed in the strange and exhilarating persona of Gloria Tremayne, exploring every alcove and niche in search of her.

In the evenings I sat in the library, feeling her around me in the gently stirring walls, hovering nearby as I emptied the packing cases like an attendant succubus. Sipping my Scotch while night closed in over the dark blue pool, I carefully analyzed her personality, deliberately varying my moods to evoke as wide a range of responses. The memory cells in the house were perfectly bonded, never revealing any flaws of character, always reposed and self-controlled. If I leapt out of my chair and switched the stereogram abruptly from Stravinsky to Stan Kenton to the MJQ, the room adjusted its mood and tempo without effort.

And yet how long was it before I discovered that there was another personality present in that house, and began to feel the curi-

ous eeriness Fay and I had noticed, like everyone else, as soon as Stammers switched the house on? Not for a few weeks, when the house was still responding to my star-struck idealism. While my devotion to the parted spirit of Gloria Tremayne was the dominant mood, the house played itself back accordingly, recapitulating only the more serene aspects of Gloria Tremayne's character.

Soon, however, the mirror was to darken.

IT was Fay who broke the spell. She quickly realized that the initial responses were being overlaid by others from a more mellow and, from her point of view, more dangerous quarter of the past. After doing her best to put up with them she made a few guarded attempts to freeze Gloria out, switching the volume controls up and down, selecting the maximum of base lift—which stressed the masculine responses—and the minimum of alto lift.

One morning I caught her on her knees by the console, poking a screwdriver at the memory drum, apparently in an effort to erase the entire store.

Taking it from her, I locked the unit and hooked the key onto my chain.

"Darling, the mortgage company could sue us for destroying

the pedigree. Without it this house would be valueless. What are you trying to do?"

Fay dusted her hands on her skirt and stared me straight in the eye, chin jutting.

"I'm trying to restore a little sanity here, Howard; if possible, find my own marriage again. I thought it might be in there somewhere."

I put my arm around her, steered her back towards the kitchen. "Darling, you're getting over-intuitive again. Just relax, don't try to upset everything."

"Upset—? Howard, what are you talking about? Haven't I a right to my own husband? I'm sick of sharing him with a homicidal neurotic who died five years ago. It's positively ghoulish!"

I winced as she snapped this out, feeling the walls in the hallway darken and retreat defensively. The air became clouded and frenetic, like a dull storm-filled day.

"Fay, you know your talent for exaggeration. . . ." I searched around for the kitchen, momentarily disoriented as the corridor walls shifted and backed. "You don't know how lucky you—"

I didn't get any further before she interrupted. Within five seconds we were in the middle of a blistering row. Fay threw all caution to the winds, deliberately, I think, in the hope of damaging the house permanent-

ly, while I stupidly let a lot of my unconscious resentment towards her come out. Finally she stormed away into her bedroom and I stamped back into the shattered lounge and slumped down angrily on the sofa.

ABOVE me the ceiling flexed and quivered, the color of roof slates, here and there mottled by angry veins that bunched the walls in on each other. The air pressure mounted but I felt too tired to open a window and sat stewing in a pit of black anger.

It must have been then that I recognized the presence of Miles Vanden Starr. All echoes of Gloria Tremayne's personality had vanished, and for the first time since moving in I had recovered my normal perspectives. The mood of anger and resentment in the lounge was remarkably persistent, far longer than expected from what had been little more than a tiff. The walls continued to pulse and knot for over half an hour, long after my own irritation had faded and I was sitting up and examining the room clear-headedly.

The anger, deep and frustrated, was obviously masculine, and I assumed, correctly, that the original source had been Vanden Starr, who had designed the house for Gloria Tremayne and lived there for over a year

before his death. To have so grooved the memory drum meant that this atmosphere of blind, neurotic hostility had been maintained for most of that time.

As the resentment slowly dispersed I could see that for the time being Fay had succeeded in her object. The serene persona of Gloria Tremayne had vanished. The feminine motif was still there, in a higher shriller key, but the dominant presence was distinctly Vanden Starr's. This new mood of the house reminded me of the courtroom photographs of him, glowering out of 1950-ish groups with Le Corbusier and Lloyd Wright, stalking about some housing project in Chicago or Tokyo like a petty dictator, heavy-jowled, thyroidal, with large lustreless eyes, and then the Vermilion Sands: 1970 shots of him, fitting into the movie colony like a shark into a gold-fish bowl.

However, he had designed some brilliant architecture, and there was power behind those baleful drives. Cued in by our tantrum, the presence of Vanden Starr had descended upon 99 Stellavista like a thundercloud. At first I tried to re-capture the earlier halcyon mood, but this had disappeared and my irritation at loosing it only served to inflate the thundercloud. An unfortunate aspect of psychotropic houses is the factor of resonance

—diametrically opposed personalities soon stabilize their relationship, the echo inevitably yielding to the new source. But where the personalities are of similar frequency and amplitude they mutually reinforce themselves, each adapting itself for comfort to the personality of the other. All too soon I began to assume the character of Vanden Starr, and my increased exasperation with Fay merely drew from the house a harder front of antagonism.

Later I knew that I was, in fact, treating Fay in exactly the way that Vanden Starr had treated Gloria Tremayne, recapitulating the steps of their tragedy with consequences that were equally disastrous.

FAY recognized the changed mood of the house immediately. "What's happened to our lodger?" she giped at dinner the next evening. "Our beautiful ghost seems to be spurning you. Is the spirit unwilling although the flesh is weak?"

"God knows," I growled testily. "I think you've really messed the place up." I glanced around the dining room for any echo of Gloria Tremayne, but she had gone. Fay went out to the kitchen and I sat over my half-eaten hors d'oeuvres, staring at it blankly, when I felt a curious ripple in the wall behind me, a

silver dart of movement that vanished as soon as I looked up. I tried to focus it without success, the first echo of Gloria since our row, but later that evening, when I went into Fay's bedroom after I heard her crying, I noticed it again.

Fay had gone into the bathroom. About to find her I felt the same echo of feminine anguish. It had been prompted by Fay's tears, but like Vanden Starr's mood set off by my own anger, it persisted long after the original cue. I followed it into the corridor as it faded out of the room but it diffused outwards into the ceiling and hung there motionlessly.

Starting to walk down to the lounge, I realized that the house was watching me like a wounded animal.

TWO days later came the attack on Fay.

I had just returned home from the office, childishly annoyed with Fay for parking her car on my side of the garage. In the cloakroom I tried to check my anger; the senso-cells had picked up the cue and began to suck hate and irritation out of me, pouring it back into the air until the walls of the cloakroom darkened and began to seethe.

I shouted some gratuitous insult at Fay, who was in the lounge, then heard her cry out.

A second later she screamed: "Howard! Quickly!"

Running towards the lounge, I flung myself at the door, expecting it to retract. Instead, it remained rigid, frame locked in the archway. The entire house seemed grey and strained, the pool outside like a tank of cold lead.

Fay shouted again. I seized the metal handle of the manual control and wrenched the door back.

Fay was almost out of sight, on one of the slab sofas in the center of the room, buried beneath the sagging canopy of the ceiling which had collapsed onto her. The heavy plastex had flowed together directly above her head, forming a blob a yard in diameter.

Raising the flaccid grey plastex with my hands, I managed to lift it off Fay, who was spread-eagled back into the cushions with only her feet protruding. She wriggled out and flung her arms around me, sobbing noiselessly.

"Howard, this house is insane, I think it's trying to kill me!"

"For heaven's sake, Fay, don't be silly. It was simply a freak accumulation of senso-cells. Your breathing probably set it off." I patted her shoulder, remembering the child I had married a few-years earlier. Smiling to myself, I watched the ceiling retract



slowly, the walls grow lighter in tone.

"Howard, can't we leave here?" Fay babbled. "Let's go and live in a static house. I know it's dull, but what does it matter—?"

"Well," I said, "it's not just dull, it's dead. Don't worry, angel, you'll get to like it here."

Fay twisted away from me. "Howard, I can't stay in this house any more. You've been getting so preoccupied recently, you're changing completely." She started to cry again, then pointed at the ceiling. "If I hadn't been lying down, do you realize it would have killed me?"

I nodded, then dusted the end of the sofa. "Yes, I can see your heel marks." Irritation welled up like bile before I could stop it. "I thought I told you not to stretch out here. This isn't a beach, Fay. You know it annoys me."

Around us the walls began to mottle and cloud again.

WHY did Fay anger me so easily? Was it, as I assumed at the time, unconscious resentment that egged me on, or was I merely a vehicle for the antagonism which had accumulated during Vanden Starr's marriage to Gloria Tremayne

and was now venting itself on the hapless couple who followed them to 99 Stellavista? Perhaps I'm over-charitable to myself in assuming the latter, but Fay and I had been tolerably happy during our five years of marriage, and I am sure my nostalgic infatuation for Gloria Tremayne couldn't have so swept me off my feet.

Either way, however, Fay didn't wait for a second attempt. Two days later I came home to find a fresh tape on the kitchen memophone, switched it on to hear her tell me that she could no longer put up with me, my nagging or 99 Stellavista and was going back east to stay with her sister.

Callously, my first reaction, after the initial twinge of indignation, was sheer relief. I still believed that Fay was responsible for Gloria Tremayne's eclipse and the emergence of Vanden Starr, and that with her gone I would recapture the early days of idyll and romance.

I was only partly right. Gloria Tremayne did return, but not in the role expected. I, who had helped to defend her at her trial, should have known better.

A FEW days after Fay left I became aware that the house had taken on a separate existence, its coded memories discharging themselves inde-

pendently of my own behavior. Often when I returned in the evening, eager to relax over half a decanter of Scotch, I would find the ghosts of Miles Vanden Starr and Gloria Tremayne in full flight, Starr's black menacing personality crowding after the tenuous but increasingly resilient quintessence of his wife. This rapier-like resistance could be observed literally—the walls of the lounge would stiffen and darken in a vortex of dull anger that converged upon a small zone of lightness hiding in one of the alcoves, as if to obliterate its presence, but at the last moment Gloria's persona would flit nimbly away, leaving the room to seethe and writhe.

Fay had set off this spirit of resistance, and I visualized Gloria Tremayne going through a similar period of living hell. As her personality re-emerged in its new role I watched it carefully, volume at maximum despite the damage the house might do to itself. Once Stammers stopped by and offered to get the circuits checked for me. He had seen the house from the road, flexing and changing color like an anguished squid. Thanking him, I made up some excuse and declined. (Later he told me that I kicked him out unceremoniously—apparently he hardly recognized me, I was striding around the dark quaking house like a madman in an

Elizabethan horror tragedy, oblivious of everything.)

Although submerged by the personality of Miles Vanden Starr, I gradually realized that Gloria Tremayne had been deliberately driven out of her mind by him. What had prompted his implacable hostility I can only hazard—perhaps he resented her success, perhaps she had been unfaithful to him. When she finally retaliated and shot him it was, I'm sure, an act of self-defense.

TWO months after she went east Fay filed a divorce suit against me. Frantically I telephoned her, explaining I'd be grateful if she held off as the publicity would probably kill the new office. However, Fay was adamant. What annoyed me most was that she sounded better than she had done for years, really happy again. When I pleaded she said she needed the divorce in order to marry again, and then, as a last straw, refused to tell me who the man was.

By the time I slammed the phone down my temper was taking off like a five-stage lunar probe. I left the office early and began a tour of the bars in Red Beach, working my way slowly back to Vermilion Sands. I hit 99 Stellavista like a one-man Siegfried Line, mowing down most of the magnolias in the

drive, ramming the car into the garage on the third pass after wrecking both auto-doors.

My keys jammed in the door lock and I finally had to kick my way through one of the glass panels. Raging upstairs onto the darkened terrace I flung my hat and coat into the pool and then slammed into the lounge. By 2 a.m., as I mixed myself a night-cap at the bar and put the last act of *Gotterdammerung* on the stereogram, the whole place was really warming up.

On the way to bed I lurched into Fay's room to see what damage I could do to the memories I still retained of her, kicked in a wardrobe and booted the matress onto the floor, turning the walls literally blue with a salvo of choice epithets.

Shortly after 3 o'clock, the decanter spilt onto the bed, I fell asleep in my room, the house revolving around me like an enormous turntable.

IT must have been only 4 o'clock when I woke, conscious of a curious silence in the darkened room. I was stretched across the bed, one hand around the neck of the decanter, the other holding a dead cigar stub. The walls were motionless, unstirred by even the residual eddies which drift through a psychotropic house when the occupants are asleep.

Something had altered the normal perspectives of the room. Trying to focus on the grey underswell of the ceiling, I listened for footsteps outside. Sure enough, the corridor wall began to retract slightly, the archway, usually a six-inch wide slit, rising to admit someone. Nothing came through, but the room expanded to accommodate an additional presence, the ceiling ballooning upwards. Astounded, I tried not to move my head, watching the unoccupied pressure zone move quickly across the room towards the bed, its motion shadowed by a small dome in the ceiling.

The pressure zone paused at the foot of the bed and hesitated for a few seconds. But instead of stabilizing, the walls began to vibrate rapidly, quivering with strange uncertain tremors, radiating a sensation of acute urgency and indecision.

Then, abruptly, the room stilled. A second later, as I lifted myself up on one elbow, a violent spasm convulsed the room, buckling the walls and lifting the bed off the floor. The entire house started to shake and writhe. Gripped by this seizure, the bedroom contracted and expanded like the chamber of a dying heart, the ceiling rising and falling, the floor yawing.

I steadied myself on the swinging bed and gradually the con-

vulsion died away, the walls realigning. I stood up, wondering what insane crisis this psychotropic *grande mal* duplicated, and bumped my head sharply on the ceiling.

The room was in darkness, thin moonlight coming through the trio of small circular vents behind the bed. These were contracting as the walls closed in on each other. Pressing my hands against the ceiling, I felt it push downwards strongly. The edges of the floor were blending into the walls as the room converted itself into a sphere.

THE air pressure mounted. I stumbled over to the vents, reached them as they clamped around my fists, air whistling out through my fingers. Face against the openings, I gulped in the cool night air, then tried to force apart the locking plastex.

The safety cut-out switch was above the door on the other side of the room. I dived across to it, clambering over the tilting bed, but the flowing plastex had submerged the whole unit.

Head bent to avoid the ceiling, I pulled off my tie, gasping at the thudding air. Trapped in the room, I was suffocating as it duplicated the expiring breaths of Vanden Starr after he had been shot. The tremendous spasm had been his convulsive reaction as the bullet from Gloria

Tremayne's gun had crashed into his chest.

I fumbled in my pockets for a knife, felt my cigarette lighter, then pulled it out and flicked it on. The room was now a grey sphere ten feet in diameter, thick veins, as broad as my arm, knotting across its surface, crushing the end-boards of the bedstead.

Brain pounding, I raised the lighter to the surface of the ceiling, let it play across the opaque fluo-glass. Immediately it began to fizz and bubble, suddenly flared alight and split apart, the two burning lips unzipping in a brilliant discharge of heat.

As the cocoon bisected itself, I could see the twisted mouth of the corridor bending down into the room, below the sagging outline of the dining room ceiling. Feet skating in the molten plastex, I pulled myself up onto the corridor. The whole house seemed to have been ruptured. Walls were buckled, floors furling at their edges, water pouring out of the pool as the unit tipped forwards on the weakened foundations. The glass slabs of the staircase had been shattered, the razor-like teeth jutting out of the wall.

I ran into Fay's bedroom, found the cut-out switch and stabbed the sprinkler alarm.

The house was still throbbing slightly, but a moment later it locked and became rigid. I leaned

against the dented wall and let the spray pour across my face from the sprinkler jets.

Around me, its wings torn and disarrayed, the house reared up like a tortured flower.

STANDING in the middle of one of the trampled flower beds, Stammers gazed up at the house, an expression of awe and bewilderment on his face. It was just after 6 o'clock and the last of the three police cars had driven off, the lieutenant in charge finally conceding defeat. "Dammit, I can't arrest a house for attempted homicide, can I?" he'd asked me somewhat belligerently. I roared with laughter at this, my initial feelings of shock having given way to an almost hysterical sense of fun.

Stammers found me equally difficult to understand.

"What on earth were you doing in there?" he asked, voice down to a whisper.

"Nothing. I tell you I was fast asleep. And relax. The house can't hear you. It's switched off."

We wandered across the churned gravel and waded through the water which lay like a huge black mirror across the front half of the lawn. Stammers shook his head. The house looked like a surrealist nightmare, all the perspectives slipped, angles displaced.

"The place must have been insane," Stammers murmured. "If you ask me it needs a psychiatrist to straighten it out."

"You're right there," I told him. "In fact, that was exactly my role—to reconstruct the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material."

"Why joke about it? It tried to kill you."

"Don't be absurd. The real culprit is Vanden Starr, but as the lieutenant implied, you can't arrest a man who's been dead for ten years. It was the pent-up memory of his death which finally erupted from the house's memory and tried to kill me. Even if Gloria Tremayne was driven into pulling the trigger, Starr pointed the gun. Believe me, I lived out his role for a couple of months. What worries me is that if Fay hadn't had enough good sense to leave me she might have been hypnotized by the persona of Gloria Tremayne into killing me, and probably would have died for it."

MUCH to Stammers' surprise, I decided to stay on at 99 Stellavista. Apart from the fact that I hadn't enough cash to buy another place, the house had certain undeniable memories for me that I didn't want to forsake. Gloria Tremayne was still there,

and I was sure that Vanden Starr had at last gone. The kitchen and service units were still functional, and apart from the weird contorted shapes most of the rooms were habitable. In addition I needed a rest, and there's nothing so quiet as a static house.

Of course, in its present form 99 Stellavista can hardly be regarded as a typical static dwelling. Yet, the deformed rooms and twisted corridors have as much personality as any psychotropic house.

The PT unit is still working and one day I shall switch it on again. But one thing worries me. The violent spasms which ruptured the house may in some way have damaged Gloria Tremayne's personality, and the tortured walls and ceilings reflect the twisted partitions of her now warped mind. To live with it might well be madness for me, as there's a subtle captivating charm about the house even in its distorted form, like the ambiguous smile of a beautiful but insane woman.

Often I unlock the control console and examine the memory drum. Her personality, whatever it may be, is there. Nothing would be simpler than to erase it. But I can't.

One day soon, whatever the outcome, I know that I shall have to switch the house on again.

THE END

They didn't think of themselves as pioneers. They simply had a job to do. And if they had to give up money, or power, or love—or life itself—that was the

FEE OF THE FRONTIER

By H. B. FYFE

ILLUSTRATOR EMSH

FROM inside the dome, the night sky is a beautiful thing, even though Deimos and Phobos are nothing to brag about. If you walk outside, maybe as far as the rocket field, you notice a difference.

Past the narrow developed strip around the dome, the desert land lies as chilled and brittle as it did for eons before Earthmen reached Mars. The sky is suddenly raw and cruel. You pull your furs around your nose and check your oxygen mask, and wish you were *inside* something, even a thin wall of clear plastic.

I like to stand here, though, and look out at it, just thinking about how far those ships grope out into the dark nowadays, and about the men who have gone out there on a few jets and a lot of guts. I knew a bunch of them . . . some still out there, I guess.

There was a time when nearly everything had to be rocketed out from Earth, before they organized all those chemical tricks that change the Martian crops to real food. Domes weren't fancy then. Adequate, of course; no sense in taking chances with lives that cost so much fuel to bring here. Still, the colonies

kept growing. Where people go, others follow to live off them, one way or another. It began to look like time for the next step outward.

Oh, the Asteroids . . . sure. Not them. I did a bit of hopping there in my own time. In fact—on account of conditions beyond my choice and control—I spent too much time on the wrong side of the hull shields. One fine day, the medics told me I'd have to be a Martian for the rest of my life. Even the one-way hop back to Earth was "not recommended."

So I used to watch the ships go out. I still remember one that almost missed leaving. *The Martian Merchant*. What joker thought that would be a good name for an exploring ship I can't imagine, but it always happens that way.

I was starting my cross-country tractor line then, and had just made the run from Schiaparelli to Asaph Dome, which was not as nice as it is now but still pretty civilized for the time. They had eight or ten bars, taverns, and other amusements, and were already getting to be quite a city.

One of the taverns near the western airlock was named the *Stardust*, and I was approaching, measuring the sand in my throat, when these spacers came out. The first one in sight was

a blocky, dark-haired fellow. He came rolling through the door with a man under each arm.

Just as I got there, he made it to his feet somehow and cracked their heads together exactly hard enough to bring peace. He acted like a man used to handling things with precision. He glanced quickly at me out of a square, serious face, then plunged back through the splintered door toward the break-up inside.

In a moment, he came out again, with two friends who looked the worse for wear. The tall, lean youngster wore a junior pilot's bands on the sleeves of his blue uniform. His untidy hair was ruffled, as if someone had been hanging onto it while in the process of giving him the shiner.

The other one was shorter and a good deal neater. Even with his tunic ripped down the front, he gave the impression of making it his life business to be neat. He was turning gray at the temples and growing a little bulge under his belt, which lent a dignity worthy of his trim mustache and expression of deferential politeness. He paused briefly to hurl an empty bottle at someone's head.

"Better take the alley there," I told the blocky one, on impulse. "It'll bring you out at the trac-

tor lot and I'll give you a lift to your ship."

He wasted no time on questions, just grabbed his friends and disappeared before the crowd came out. I walked around a couple of corners and back to my tractor bus. This lot was only a clear space inside the Number Four Airlock. At that time, two or three tractors came in every day from the mines or other domes. Most of the traffic was to and from the spaceport.

"Who's that?" asked a low voice from the shadows.

"Tony Lewis," I answered.

The three of them moved into the dim light from the airlock guardpost.

"Thanks for the steer," said the blocky one, "but we can stay till morning."

He seemed as fresh as if he had just landed. His friends were a trifle worn around the edges.

"Keep playing that rough," I said, "and you may not make it to morning."

He just grinned. "We have to," he said, "or the ship can't blast off."

"Oh, you three make the ship go, huh?"

"Just about. This is Hugh Konnel, the third pilot; the gent with the dignified air is Ron Meadows, the steward. I'm Jim Howlet, and I look after the fuel system."

I admitted that the ship could hardly do without them. Howlet's expression suggested that he was searching his memory.

"Lewis . . ." he murmured. "I've heard of Tony Lewis somewhere. You a spacer?"

"Used to be," I told him. "Did some piloting in the Belt."

Young Konnel stopped fingering his eye.

"Oh, I've heard of you," he said. "Even had to read some of your reports."

After that, one thing led to another, with the result that I offered to find somewhere else to relax. We walked south from the airlock, past a careless assortment of buildings. In those days, there was not much detailed planning of the domes. What was necessary for safety and for keeping the air thicker and warmer than outside was done right; the remaining space was grabbed by the first comers.

Streets tended to be narrow. As long as an emergency truck could squeeze through at moderate speed, that was enough. The buildings grew higher toward the center of the dome, but I stopped while they were still two stories.

The outside of Jorgensen's looked like any other flimsy construction under the dome. We had just passed a row of small warehouses, and the only differ-

ence seemed to be the lighted sign at the front.

"We can stop at the bar inside while we order dinner," I said.

"Sounds good," said Howlet. "I could go for a decent meal. Rations on an exploring ship run more to calories than taste."

The pilot muttered something behind us. Howlet turned his head.

"Don't worry about it, Hughie," he retorted. "It'll be all over the dome by tomorrow anyway."

"But they said not to—"

"Mr. Lewis won't say anything, and he's not the only spacer who'll guess it."

It was easy to figure out. Ships did little exploring in the Belt now—plenty of untouched rocks there but nothing really unknown. "Exploring" could only mean that a hop to Jupiter was in the works at last. There had already been rumors about a few wide swings outside the Belt.

Well, it was just about time.

I would have liked to go too, and it was more than just a spacer's curiosity. To my mind, man *had* to move out in space. Being only halfway in control of his own planetary system was no state to be found in by the first interstellar visitors.

That is a meeting bound to happen sooner or later. It would

be better for the human race to be able to do the visiting, I thought.

The inside of Jorgensen's always surprised new visitors to Asaph Dome. It was different from anything on Earth, and yet not too much like the real Mars either. That way, Jorgensen hoped to catch both the sandeaters and the tourists. The latter came to rough it in local color, the former to dream of a better world.

"Hey! Look at the stars over the bar!" exclaimed Howlet.

To begin with, the bar was of pinkish sandstone, smoothed and covered by a coating of plastic. Behind it, instead of less imaginative mirrors or bottle displays, Jorgensen had had some drifter paint a night desert: all dull pink and bronze crags smothering in sand under a black sky. The stars twinkled like glass beads, which they were. Lights were dim enough to hide the Martian austerity of the metal furnishings.

"The Earth tourists spend a lot of time here," I told the trio. "Seems they'd rather look at that sky than the real one outside the dome."

The dining room was for the souls of the locals, who could admire the desert more conveniently than find a good meal. It was mostly green and white, with a good deal of the white

being crystal. In the corners stood fake pine trees which Jorgensen had repainted every month; but what drew the sandeaters was the little fountain in the middle of the room.

Real water!

Of course, it was the same gallon or two pumped around and around, but clear, flowing water is a sight on Mars. When the muddy trickles in the canals began to make you feel like diving in for a swim, you stopped in at Jorgensen's to watch the fountain while his quiet, husky waiters served your dinner most efficiently.

"Say, this is a cut or two above ship chow," admitted Konnel when the food arrived. "What's that? Music too?"

"They have a trio that plays now and then," I told him. "Sometimes a singer too, when not much is going on in the back room."

"Back room?" Howlet caught up the words.

"Never mind. What would you do right now with a million? Assuming you could beat the wheel or the other games in the first place."

"Do they use . . . er . . . real money?" asked Meadows, cocking an eyebrow.

"Real as you like," I assured him. "It collects in these places. I guess lots of sandeaters think

they might pick up a first-class fare back to Earth."

"Do they?" inquired Konnel, chewing on his steak.

The string trio, which had been tuning up, eased into a quiet song as he spoke. We listened as the question hung in the air, and I decided that the funny feeling under my belt was homesickness, all the stranger because I owned three homes not too far from the Martian equator.

"As far as I know," I answered, "the luck seems to run to those who can't go back anyway, for one reason or another. The ones just waiting for a lucky night to go home rich . . . are still waiting."

The door to the back room opened, letting through a blend of talk and small mechanical noises. It also emitted a strikingly mismatched couple.

The girl was dark-haired and graceful, though not very tall. She wore a lavender gown that showed a good deal of trim back as she turned to walk toward the musicians, and what the gown overlooked the walk demonstrated. The man was fat enough to make him seem short until he approached. His face and baldish dome were desert-reddened, and his eyebrows were faded to invisibility. Jorgensen.

Nodding casually to various diners, he noticed the new faces

at our table. He ambled over lightly for one of his bulk, and it became apparent that he was far from being blubbery. His belly stuck out, but he could probably knock the wind out of you with it.

"Hello, Tony!" he said in a wheezy tenor. "Introducing some friends to the best hamburger joint on Mars?"

Then he leaned on the back of Konnel's chair and told a couple of his old prospecting yarns to make sure everybody was happy, while the girl began to sing with the trio. She had hardly enough voice to be heard over Jorgensen's stories. I noticed Konnel straining to listen.

Finally, Jorgensen saw it too. Leaving Howlet and Meadows grinning at a highly improbable adventure, he slapped the boy on the shoulder.

"I see you noticed Lilac Malone, boy. Like to buy her coffee?"

"C-coffee?" stuttered Konnel.

"Made with water," I reminded him. "Awful waste here. Like champagne."

"I'll tell her she's invited," said Jorgensen, wagging a finger at her.

"The fellows are going out in the morning," I tried to head him off. "They don't have much time—"

"All the more reason to meet Lilac while they can!"

We watched her finish her song. She had rhythm, and the lavender dress swirled cutely around her in the Martian gravity; but, of course, Lilac would never have made a singer on Earth. Her voice was more good-natured than musical.

She arrived with the coffee, said "hello" to me, waved good-bye to Jorgensen's back, and set out to get acquainted with the others. Catching Howlet's wink, and suspecting that he was used to getting Konnel back to space-ships, I relaxed and offered to show Meadows the back room.

He muttered something about his gray hairs, but came along after an amused glance at Lilac and Konnel.

Jorgensen's gambling room was different from the bar and dining room as they were from each other. Decorations were simple. Drapes of velvety synthetic, dyed the deep green that Martian colonists like, covered the walls. Indirect lighting gave a pretty gleam to the metal gadgets on the tables. Because they used a heavier ball, roulette looked about the same as on Earth, and the same went for the dice games.

"Interesting," Meadows murmured, feeling in his pocket.

He pointed a thumb at the *planets* table. It was round, with a small, rectangular projection

for the operator's controls and calculator. In the nine differently colored circular tracks, rolled little globes representing the planets. These orbits were connected by spirals of corresponding colors, symbolic of ship orbits swooping inward or outward to other planets.

"You pick yourself two planets," I explained. "For better odds, pick a start and a destination. The man throws his switch and each little ball is kicked around its groove by a random number of electrical impulses."

"And how do I win?"

"Say you pick Venus-to-Saturn. See that silver spiral going out from Venus and around the table to the orbit of Saturn? Well, if Venus stops within that six-inch zone where the spiral starts *and* if Saturn is near where it ends, you scoop in the stardust."

Meadows fingered his mustache as he examined the table.

"I . . . ah . . . suppose the closer you come, the more you win, eh?"

"That's the theory. Most people are glad to get anything back. It's honest enough, but the odds are terrific."

A couple of spacers made room for us, and I watched Meadows play for a few minutes. The operator grinned when he saw me watching. He had a lean, pale face and had been an astrogator

until his heart left him in need of Martian gravity.

"No coaching, Tony!" he kidded me.

"Stop making me look like a partner in the place!" I answered.

"Thought one night you were going to be . . . No winners, gentlemen. Next bets!"

The spheres had come to rest with Pluto near one end of a lavender spiral and Mercury touching the inner end, but no one had had the insanity to bet that way. Meadows began to play inner planet combinations that occasionally paid, though at short odds. He made a bit on some near misses, and I decided to have a drink while he lost it.

I found Howlet, Konnel, and Lilac Malone in the bar admiring the red-bronze landscape. When he heard about Meadows, Howlet smiled.

"If it isn't fixed, they better prepare to abandon," he laughed. "People look at that face and won't believe he always collects half the ship's pay."

Lilac saw a chance to do her duty, and suggested that we all go in to support Meadows. I stayed with my drink until Jorgensen drifted in to have a couple with me and talk of the old days.

After a while, one of his helpers came up and murmured

something into his big red ear. He shrugged and waved his hand.

The next time it happened, about twenty minutes later, I was on the point of matching him with a story about a petrified ancient Martian that the domers at Schiaparelli dug out of a dry canal. Jorgensen lowered his faded eyebrows and strode off like a bear on eggshells, leaving me there with the unspoken punch line about what they were supposed to have dug up with the Martian.

Well, that build-up was wasted, I thought.

Quite a number of sandeaters, as time passed, seemed to drift in and out of the back room. Finally, Howlet showed up again.

"How'd you make out?" I asked when he had a drink in his hand.

"I left my usual deposit," he grinned, "but you ought to see Meadows! Is he ever plugging their pipes! He ran Mercury to Pluto, and it paid off big."

"It ought to; no one ever makes it."

"He did it *twice*! Plus other combinations. With him making out our daily menus, I'll never know why I'm not lucky too. Know what he's doing?"

I lifted an eyebrow.

"He's lending money to every loafer that puts the beam on

him. But the guy has to show a non-transferrable ticket for passage to Earth."

"Darn few can," I grunted.

"That's why he keeps sending them out with the price of one and the promise to stake them when they get back. I never saw such expressions!"

At that point, Jorgensen sailed through the curtained doorway between the bar and back room. A craggy, desert look had settled on his red moon-face. He introduced me to two men with him as if someone were counting down from ten.

"Glad to meet you and Mr. Howlet," said the one called McNaughton.

I recognized "Mr. V'n Uh" as Van Etten, a leading citizen of the dome who had been agitating with McNaughton and others of the Operating Committee to form a regular police department. Jorgensen seemed to have something else on his mind.

"Howlet, how about having a word with your shipmate?"

"What's he done wrong?" asked Howlet blandly.

Jorgensen scowled at a pair of baggy-seated sandeaters who strode through the front door with pale green tickets clutched in their hands. They sniffed once at the bar, but followed their stubbled chins into the back room at max acc.

"I don't say it's wrong,"

growled Jorgensen, glaring after the pair. "It just makes the place look bad."

"Oh, it's good advertising, Jorgy," laughed McNaughton. "People were forgetting that game could be beaten. Now, Mr. Howlet—"

Jorgensen talked him under.

"It's not losing a little money that I mind—"

Some of the drink I was sneaking slipped down the wrong way.

"Well, it's *not!*" bellowed Jorgensen. "But if they all pick up the broadcast that this is where to get a free ride home, I'll have just another sand trap here."

Howlet shrugged and put down his glass. Van Etten nudged me and made a face, so I got up first.

"Never mind," I said. "Being the one that took him in there, I'll check."

Two more men came through the front door. The big one looked like a bodyguard. The one with the dazed look carried a small metal case that could be unfolded into a portable desk. He went up to Jorgensen and asked where he could set up a temporary ticket office for Interplanet.

While I was watching over my shoulder, three or four sand-eaters coming out of the back room shoved me aside to get at him. The last I saw before leaving was Van Etten shushing

Jorgensen while McNaughton grabbed Howlet by the tunic zipper for a sales talk.

Inside, after getting through the crowd at the *planets* table, I could see that a number of betters were following Meadows' plays, making it that much worse for Jorgensen. Even Konnel had a small pile before him, although he seemed to be losing some of Lilac's attention to Meadows. While the little spheres spun in their orbits, the steward counted out money into twitching palms, wrote names on slips of paper, and placed bets. Somehow, he hit a winner every five or six bets, which kept his stack growing.

I joggled Lilac's elbow and indicated Konnel.

"How about taking him out for a drink so an old customer can squeeze in for a few plays?" I said.

The money-glow faded gradually from her eyes as she focused on me. She took her time deciding; but from the way she snuggled up to Konnel to whisper in his ear, it looked as if she might really be stuck on him. He winked at me.

Such a gasp went up as we changed places that I thought my cuff must have brushed Pluto, but it was just Meadows making a long-odds hop from Earth to Uranus. The operator no longer

even flinched before punching the distances and bet on his little computer, and groping in his cash drawer to pay off.

I stood there a few minutes, wondering if the game could be fixed after all. Still, the man who invented it also made encoding machines for the Earth space fleet. Meadows must be having a run of blind luck—no time to interrupt.

On my way out, Howlet caught me at the door of the bar.

"How about some coffee?" he asked. "We'll have to start back soon. You'll be surprised at the time. Dining room still open?"

"Always. Okay, let's sober up and watch the fountain."

Only two or three women and a dozen men sat in the restaurant now. The part-time musicians had disappeared for a few hours of sleep before their usual jobs. We ordered a thermos pot of coffee and Howlet asked me about McNaughton.

"I guess it was on the level," he said when I described the man's Committee position. "He got a boost out of how they had to patch up some troublemaker he knew, after that bar fight we had. Wanted to make me chief cop here."

"Some domes have regular police forces already," I confirmed.

"So he said. Claimed a lot of

police chiefs have been elected as mayors. Then he said that someday there will be a Martian Assembly, and men with a start in dome politics will be ready for it, and so on."

"He's exactly right," I admitted. "When do you figure to start?"

"Maybe the next time I pass through." He winked. "If it's still open."

I relaxed and grinned at him. Somehow, I liked his looks just then.

"You shouldn't be gone too long. It's a good spot to put your ladder down."

He helped himself to more coffee and stared into his cup. I knew—the watches near the end of a hop when you wondered about the dead, oily air, when the ones off watch kept watching the astrogator's expression, when you got the idea it was time to come in out of the dark before you made that one slip.

How many pick their landing? I thought. *How many never know how close they come to making their mistake, or being a statistic in somebody else's?*

"Why the double trance?" asked Meadows.

He brought with him a vague memory of departing chatter and tramping feet in the background. Howlet shoved out a chair for him.

"Everything okay?" asked

Jorgensen, bustling up. "Buy anyone a drink?"

"What have they got there . . . coffee?" asked Meadows, sniffing.

"Jimmy!" yelled Jorgensen to a waiter. "Pot of coffee for Ron! Hot!"

He slapped Meadows' shoulder and took his glowing red face away.

"What makes him your buddy?" I asked Meadows.

"In the end, I missed Mercury by ten inches and they got most of it back!"

There was no answer to that. He must have been half a million ahead.

"What about the sandeaters you promised to stake?" asked Howlet, grinning like a man who has seen it happen before but still enjoys it.

"Some of them helped me lose it," said Meadows. "Now they will all just have to use those tickets, I suppose. Where's Hughie and his little friend? Coffee all around and we'll get on course, eh?"

"Thought he was with you," answered Howlet.

"I'll look in the bar," I volunteered, remembering the kid had left with more of a roll than Meadows had now.

A casual search of the bar and back room revealed both nearly empty, a natural condition just before dawn. No one had seen Konnel, apparently, so I went

outside and squinted along the dim, narrow street. Four or five drunks, none tall enough to be Konnel, were slowly and softly singing their way home. The door slid open behind me and the other two came out quickly.

"Oh, there you are! I asked around too," said Howlet in a low voice. "Can you trust that Jorgensen? They wouldn't let me in the office behind the back room."

"He's a better sport than he looks," I said.

"I wonder," murmured Meadows. "He looked queer when I was so far ahead. Or maybe one of his huskies got ideas about keeping a handy hostage . . ."

Howlet suddenly looked dangerous. I gathered that he thought something of the boy, and was heating up to the door-smashing stage.

"Let's check one other place," I suggested, "before we make a mistake."

My starting off fast up the street left him the choice of coming quietly or staying to wonder. They both came. I could feel them watching me.

I turned right into a narrow street, went along it about fifty yards, and paused where it was crossed by a still narrower alley. Hoping I remembered the way, I groped along the lefthand branch of the alley. A trace of

light had begun to soften the sky over the dome, but had not yet seeped down to ground level.

Howlet's soft footsteps trailed me. I knocked on what seemed to be the right door. There was no answer—only to be expected. I hammered again.

"No one aboard, it would appear," murmured Meadows.

It was meant as a question. I shrugged in the darkness and banged longer and louder. Finally, listening at the flimsy panel, I detected muffled footsteps.

The door opened a crack.

"It's Tony Lewis, Lilac."

The black opening widened, until she must have seen the two behind me. She wore a thin robe that glimmered silver in the dim light.

"Send the boy out, Lilac," I said.

"Why should I?"

That much was good; she might have pretended not to have him there.

"He has to catch his ship, Lilac."

Behind me, I heard Howlet stir uneasily. The door began to close, but my foot was in the track. Howlet could not see that.

"Don't shut it, sister," he said, "or we'll smash it down!"

He could have too, in about ten seconds, the way they build on Mars.

"You wanna get yourself lynched?" Lilac warned him.

"Over a—on account of *you*?"

"Shut up, Howlet!" I interrupted. "Let me talk to the lady alone!"

He must have understood my tone; he let Meadows pull him away a few steps.

"And less of the 'lady' business outa *you*," said Lilac, but low enough to keep it private. "We both know Mars, so let's take things the way they are."

"That's why I came, Lilac. Taking things that way means he has to go."

"What're you gonna say? He has a job to do, or some such canal dust?"

"Not exactly. They might pick up another third pilot. They might manage somehow without any. But he won't like himself much, later, for missing his chance."

She swung the edge of the door back and forth in impatient little jerks. Finally, she took her hand off the latch and let it roll free. She still blocked the opening, however, and I waited.

"Look, Tony," she said after a pause, "what makes you think I couldn't settle down with him? I never figured to be an . . . entertainer . . . all my life. With the stake I already got together, we could start something. A mine, maybe, or a tractor service like yours. Mars is growing—"

"Pull your head inside the dome and breathe right!" I snapped at her. "I don't mind your dreaming, Lilac, but there isn't any more time."

It was light enough now to see her stiffen. She glared at me.

"You tryin' to say I couldn't make a home here? You know better, Tony. Some of the best known women on Mars didn't exactly come here first-class!"

I held up my hand. She was beginning to get loud.

"It wouldn't matter if you were a princess. It's not what he'd think of you; it's what he'd wonder about himself, piloting a sand-buggy instead of a rocket."

In the alley, one of the spacers shuffled his feet impatiently. I hurried on, hoping to clinch it before she turned stubborn.

"You, at least, ought to understand men better than most, Lilac. Maybe it doesn't make sense, but it would be smarter to grab him after he's had his share of space instead of before."

It was hard to breathe without sounding loud in the stillness. Just as I had to swallow or choke, Lilac's shoulders slumped an inch or two.

"I'll wake him up," she said in a tired voice.

Feeling as if I had struck her, I stepped back into the alley. A few minutes later, Konnel slipped

ped out and shut the door behind him. No one said a word. From the set of his shoulders, it seemed that he might be just as glad the alley was dim; but he simply trailed along behind.

We walked back to Number Four Airlock in a silence that had me counting the footsteps. When we reached the tractor parking lot, I cleared my throat.

"Wait a minute. I'll warm up my sand-saucer and give you a lift to your ship."

"Maybe we won't need to impose on you any more, Tony," said Howlet. "Looks like those machines over there are going out."

I followed his gesture and, by luck, caught the eye of a driver I knew. I waved and jerked my thumb at the spacers beside me.

"Let's go!" said Howlet as the tractor slowed. "Thanks for everything, Tony. Get yourself some sleep; the night watches in these domes are rough."

Konnel waited until they were a few steps away. Even then, he hesitated.

"Forget it!" I said. "You aren't the first spacer they had to pump out of some odd corner. Look me up when you get back!"

He shook hands and trotted after his friends. They scrambled up the ladder to the cab. The tractor picked up speed, lumbering into the airlock.

Later, a little after noon, I crawled out of bed and watched the flare of their pipes as the ship streaked up into the dark Martian sky. I hoped they would make it—almost as much as I wished it could have been me.

Well, I still come out to the wall of whatever dome I find myself in, to watch the sky a while—not that I'll see *those* boys coming down at this late date! They must have splattered to a puddle on Jupiter, or slipped back into the sun, or taken up a cold, dark orbit out where they'll never bother anyone. Nobody will ever know for sure, I suppose.

If I had it to do over again?

No, of course I don't feel funny about it. If they weren't the ones, it would have been another crew. By the law of averages, a certain number of bad tries seems to go with every new push out into space. Maybe there's no reason it has to be

like that, but it always has. When the bad luck is used up, someone makes a new frontier.

Why say "superstition"? Each new orbit out from the sun has cost plenty in money, ships, and lives; it's the admission price.

Sure, it was too bad about Konnel and his little girl—who, by the way, later married a very important man in Asaph Dome. It would have been nice to see Meadows wind up rich, or for Howlet to become mayor of the dome, but what could I do? Which one should I have talked into staying for the sake of love or money or power, without even being able to go in his place?

Every time Man pushes ahead a little, a percentage of the pushers pay the fare. Still, it will be healthier if we push out of this planetary system before someone else pushes in.

For all we know, they may be on the way.

THE END



Recidivism Preferred

By JOHN JAKES

Mellors was happy in Pineville—except for one problem. Why did he keep having that dream about a giant billboard that said only: "Acme Lead Works"?

RANDOLF Mellors ("rhymes with cellars," the newsmagazine *Tempis* in its cover story three weeks before declaring bankruptcy) was the world's greatest thief. His only difficulty as a subject for scrutiny here is that circumstances beyond his control had made him completely uninteresting. That is to say, dull.

But if you had asked the passengers in the long, mighty and black Excalibur Special Touring Saloon roaring down County Highway #2 one hellish hot day during state fair season whether Randolph Mellors was unworthy of study, all three, including that small, mummified, pink-scalped one in the immense tonneau, would have exchanged sly sneers which implied that if you thought Randolph Mellors was

dull, you just didn't understand the workings of free-wheeling capitalism.

Still, Randolph Mellors was a soulless hulk of his former con-niving self.

Oh, the looks were there. He had aged somewhat. The sleek hair was a trifle gray. But the willowy frame remained. And the inscrutable mouth, the long jaw, the cadaverous frame. But suavity is a difficult item to merchandise while selling turnip greens, baking soda, peanuts, baby bottle brushes and bunion remedies from behind a counter of pine planks in a crossroads store. Where oh where, was the Raffles-like glory of yesteryear?

Who cared? Certainly, not the inhabitants of Pineville. To them Randolph Mellors was only a slightly suspicious (because

strange) outlander who had come shuffling through the gum-trees one spring morning. An outlander who had gradually oriented himself to Pineville community life or what passed for it around eight shanties, two stores and a gas pump. He kept his mouth shut and made no mistakes when totalling up purchases in Larry Lumpkin's Emporium.

Larry Lumpkin liked to show dogs, hunt possum and play checkers. Hiring a clerk gave him the time, now he was getting along. (Of course that wasn't any accident either. His psychic readiness to employ a clerk had been thoroughly researched.)

But other than the relaxing Larry Lumpkin, who, in all honesty, cared a hang about Randolph Mellors? Certainly not Vinnie Mudgerock, for whom Randolph was just now wrapping up a bolt of muslin and a pack of disposable diapers. Outside on the pine sidewalk Vinnie Mudgerock's wee month-old infant reposed in a broken-down perambulator, sucking eagerly on a nutritionally deficient peppermint stick.

"That be all, Miz Mudgerock?" inquired Randolph, wiping his hands on his apron. Randolph had always been a consummate actor. In Pineville he had managed to acquire a trace

of the local dialect, which demonstrated conclusively that no matter how hard bureaucracy tried, bureaucracy could not win every hand. (As the three assorted inhabitants of the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon, a quarter of a mile out of town now, engine snarling, were hell-bent to prove.)

When Miz Mudgerock said that would be all, Randolph said, "Leave me carry this bundle out to the car for you."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Mellors." Miz Mudgerock gave him a yeasty smile.

RANDOLF Mellors, of course, found it impossible to smile. He did not know why. He also had a violent dislike of anyone who looked at him straight in the eye. He did not know why about this either, except that it made him want to start running. Further, he had periodic dreams in which he saw only one thing, a vast signboard in the rain, painted with three-foot letters reading:

Acme Lead Works.

Even including these three idiosyncrasies, however, the dullness of Randolph Mellors was reasonably total.

Distantly down County Highway #2 boiled fuming clouds of tan dust. Pineville dozed. The sky stretched blue and bright all the way to the state fair-

grounds where Larry Lumpkin was doubtless engaged right now in a checker game, having left Randolph to mind the store. Randolph put the paper sack into the rear seat of Miz Mudgerock's dust-yellow flivver. Then he walked over to where the lady was picking up her infant from amongst gooey blankets.

While burping the smeared tot, Miz Mudgerock's mouth dropped open.

"Why, Mr. Mellors, you have the funniest look on your face."

"I do?" said a surprised Randolph.

"You sure do. What you lookin' at? That silly ole candy stick?"

"I guess I was," said Randolph, suddenly extremely nervous.

"You hongry or suthin? You looked like you wanted to chew up that ole peppermint stick just to bits."

"Hon . . . uh, hungry? No, er, not in the least." With a real feeling of terror Randolph Mellors said, most truthfully, "I loathe. . . er . . . don't like candy."

"You *are* a puzzler," said Miz Mudgerock. "Where'd you ever come from, to a place like this, anyhow?"

"Up north," Randolph, mortally terrified now. It was the best answer he could give, considering he didn't know the correct one.

The roar of the Excalibur Saloon grew thunderous. The dust cloud bloomed. A yellow hound narrowly avoided being jellied beneath the tires of the highway monster. Randolph Mellors wiped his hands furiously on his apron, as though he'd done something unsanitary. A view of the Acme Lead Works sign flashed on and off in his head, for no apparent reason.

"Excuse me, Miz Mudgerock."

He quivered and plunged like a scared hare back into the crackery gloom of Larry Lumpkin's store. He stood with his back to the fly-specked plate glass in the diffused sunlight which filtered through it until he heard the fliver putt off up into the rolling hills. Once again he was face to face with the dreadful enigma of himself. The sensation was akin to staring at a newly wiped blackboard of the dimensions of the Great Wall of China. Only the deafening peal of Larry Lumpkin's jangling store bell prevented Randolph from plunging further into a morass of futile introspection.

THE TRIO from the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon were certainly a sight.

The first tapped one mummified spat-clad foot and peered at Randolph from out small ratty eyes. The old gentleman wore

an old-fashioned high collar and eye glasses on a black string, plus a pin stripe suit which even Randolph Mellors—somehow—knew was out of style. The small old gentleman's companions, however, were startling studies in what could either be termed the seedy or the raffish. Or worse.

There was a fat one, three hundred pounds, in a suit the size of a tent, that sported egg stains on its lapels. He had a tangled brown beard the size of a spade and a mass of wooly brown hair to match. His novelty was further heightened by the suggestion of alien life within this hairy mass.

His companion, an epicene youth hardly old enough to vote but possessing a head too big for the rest of him, appeared to stare inside himself, if that were possible, from behind like plate glass window spectacles. He looked as though he might unveil a hatchet from somewhere within his obviously rented chauffeur's uniform and go totally berserk any minute.

The little old mummy advanced. He studied the store, but had no time to speak before the behemoth with the brown beard pulled a whisky flask from his pocket, tilting back his head, and proceeding to pour booze down his throat while orgasmic shudders seized him.

With surprising agility old mummyface danced across the store and slapped the flask out of the fat man's hands.

"All right, Dr. Kloog, that is sufficient. I warned you."

"But—my God—" gasped Dr. Kloog. "Seven hundred miles cold turkey. Banner, you fiend, I've got to have a drink—"

"Which do you need most?" hissed mummyface. "Hooch or a paycheck?"

"Someday," Kloog threatened, "someday some college'll take me back and—(belch)." Dr. Kloog lowered his bovine head. "You win."

The cretinish prodigy in chauffeur's garb sniggered at his companion's expense. The little man addressed as Banner spun around on one of his patent leather toes and pointed a finger.

"As for you, Dr. Rumsgate, you're no better off than he is."

"It's just that the attitudes on vivisection in this country—" purred Dr. Rumsgate.

"That," said Banner with steel in his tone, "will be all."

Returning toward the counter and making a gesture which included the stupefied Mellors, he continued, "If you gentlemen will bear in mind that we're in a public place, and stop making exhibitions of yourselves, I'll proceed with my purchase." Glancing up at the shelves, he

said, "Good morning, sir. I wonder if you could tell me how far it is to the state capital."

"State capital?" Randolph repeated. "That's a hundred miles west."

"Dear me," said Banner. "A wrong turn. I wonder, could you sell me a pack of cigarettes? Do you have Status? Ivory-tipped, if you please."

"No Status, no, sir," said Randolph, running his eyes over the shelves. "How about Board Chairmans? Wolfbaits? Big Cities? Sexos?"

"A pack of Board Chairmans will do." Randolph handed him the brightly lithographed cardboard container, accepted the twenty dollar bill without taking his eyes off the register, rang the sale and held out the change. Randolph blinked. Banner had already broken open his pack, turned his back, and was passing out the door, lighting a Board Chairman while his two flunkies flanked him.

Randolf stared for ten seconds at the nineteen dollars and fifty cents resting in his palm. The Acme Lead Works flashed behind his eyes, three feet high in the rain. Suddenly Randolph felt as though a sledge had knocked him in the head.

He ran from behind the counter and shouted, "Excuse me sir, but you forgot your change."

THE expression on the mummified face of the little old man as he turned back into the store was maniacal. For a long moment he seemed frozen in a beam of sunlight, giggling and leering at his two scientific mates. He nudged each one in the ribs. Dr. Kloog snuffled like an elephant about to charge. Dr. Rumsgate rolled his eyes. Somewhere within Banner's shrunken ribcage a peculiar sound was building, a sound of crackling paper that passed for hysterical mirth. It came bursting from his scissors lips and he began to caper up and down.

"He's the one," Banner cackled. "Oh, mercy, yes, he is the one."

"Don't let's waste time," said Dr. Rumsgate, as though sadistically titillated.

"Grab him," said Dr. Kloog in a pant.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen—" Randolph began. "You're making a mistake—"

Dr. Kloog, Dr. Rumsgate and Banner, all three, looked Randolph straight in the eye.

Something wild, like a whip, cracked in Randolph's head. He put one hand on the counter and vaulted.

He came down like a cat on the balls of its feet, perfectly poised, as though going off balconies and second stories were old stuff. One lithe hand whipped

out. A silver gleam caught sunlight. Randolph crouched in the shadows near the magazine rack. He made small wicked circles in the air with the blade of the carving knife he'd ripped from a faded point of sale card.

"Stay back! I—I don't want any part of you three."

Dr. Rumsgate sniggered. "Automatic reaction. Partial breakthrough."

"Weak conditioning," nodded Dr. Kloog. "It'll be a cinch."

"Ah, God, to have the chance again," exclaimed Rumsgate, "after being de-licensed—"

"Keep quiet!" Banner snarled. They did. Banner tried to assume an ingratiating air before the tigerish man crouching beside a display of the July issue of *Hollywood Love Thrills and Confessions*. "My dear Mr. Mellors—"

"How do you know my name?"

"Never mind, Mr. Mellors, we know it. I want to assure you that—"

"Get out of this store before I do some carving."

"You're being extremely uncooperative. If you only knew—"

"Leave me alone," Randolph shouted suddenly, an odd, desperate sort of pleading note in his voice. Almost like a child he yelled, "I haven't done anything!"

"But my dear man," shrieked Banner, "that is precisely the trouble."

"Get him!" exclaimed Dr. Kloog, and launched himself through space.

THE ambition of Dr. Kloog was considerably more elevated than his trajectory. One supple spring to the top of a cracker barrel by Randolph and Dr. Kloog found himself tangled in the magazine rack, *Hollywood Love Thrills and Confessions* raining down upon him in profusion. Dr. Rumsgate, apparently had an aversion for the physical. He hopped back and forth from one foot to the other, clapping his palms together as if he could not contain his excitement. Banner couldn't contain his excitement either, except that it achieved a somewhat more lethal nature. Its release took the form of curses, then physical blows rained upon the persons of the two scientists. By that time Randolph Mellors, raising his forearms to shield his head, had gone through the plate glass window of Larry Lumpkin's Emporium in one magnificent crashing leap.

"Oh, you wretched bunglers —!" Banner howled.

A smooth muffled roar filled the store. The gas pump disappeared in a cloud of saffron dust. The Excalibur Special Touring Saloon began to weave up County Highway # 2 at something near seventy, its course a continuous S-curve, as though a mortally

terrified man were at the wheel. Which happened to be the case.

Dr. Kloog, peering through the fractured shards of glass, did a double take and caught hold of Banner's arm.

"Banner, hang on. Banner, don't punch me that way. He took the bus."

"—vile, unspeakable, bumbling, wretched—"

"Ah, ah!" shrieked Dr. Rums-gate. "Yes, *yes*. Banner, the remote, the *remote!*"

"—unprintable, censorable, bowdlerized *fools*, you'll never—"

Banner's eye blink rate suddenly accelerated. His breath hissed between his two thousand dollar New York City teeth. Then he let out a queer little chuckle.

"The remote! Why, of course! Poor Mellors. Been out of the city too long." From the inner breast pocket of his suit, he pulled a small electronic pack housed in plastic and covered with knobs, similar to the units used in a less advanced day to tune televisions across a room.

UNAWARE of the manipulations about to be committed, Randolph Mellors drove like hell over, around and through the execrable chuckholes and corduroy strips of the county road. Behind him a volcano of dust obscured the crossroads in the mirror, which was just as well. The horrid vision of staring eyes in

the store's musky interior haunted him and brought unbearably cold sweat to every point on his body.

Next to him on the seat shone the fierce, naked brightness of the carving knife. Glancing at it, Randolph experienced a mysterious shudder of revulsion. He quickly rolled down the Excalibur's side window, steered with one hand and flung the weapon off into the pines.

A moment later he wondered just why he had thrown away his only means of defense.

His wonderment was transitory. The window began to roll itself up.

Randolf tried to crank it down manually. No go. He felt the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon begin to decelerate. He crushed the floor pedal all the way down. He swung the steering wheel in a full circle. It did not object. The Saloon, however, was now running in a perfectly straight line, corduroy and all, at slightly less than thirty miles per hour.

Next thing Randolph knew, the car nosed itself into a side road, threw itself into reverse and started to cruise placidly straight back toward the crossroads where three figures and a gas pump stood waiting.

Randolf flung himself to the other side of the car. But every exit including those in the tonneau, had been remotely locked

Helpless, sweat popping out all over his face, Randolph sat under the wheel and watched like a man hypnotized as the Touring Saloon rolled inexorably back to Lumpkin's store.

The brakes gave a faint squeak as it stopped in the dust. The three strangers surrounded the vehicle, whose doors now popped unlocked. Banner opened the one on the driver's side. He motioned in a most gentlemanly way for Randolph to climb out.

Terrified, Randolph asked: "What—what—please tell me what I've done."

"Nothing," said Banner, false teeth gleaming. "You're an unfortunate victim."

"The process," rumbled Dr. Kloog as he rummaged in the tonneau, "is called Socialization. You're social, that's all. Now where are my instruments?"

"Actually," came the voice of Dr. Rumsgate, from somewhere behind Mellors, "you'll really thank us after we—"

After? After what?

After the gleaming needle slid into the musculature of his shoulderblade, which was after he screwed his head around to stare at Dr. Rumsgate, who had sneaked up on him by opening the door directly to the rear of the driver's seat. Now Randolph's horrified gaze locked with the slightly mad eyes behind the window glass of spectacles. Ran-

dolf felt himself consumed by that gaze, swallowed by it. He tried to crawl from the vehicle. Somehow or other that devil Rumsgate had injected simple syrup into his veins.

And the simple syrup was spreading. His legs turned into it. Then his arms. When he tried to move, flee, escape, all he could do was ooze. He had no power left.

Most amazingly, it was raining inside the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon. Raining on Dr. Rumsgate's big head.

No, Randolph thought to himself, bemused now, gripped by a pleasant twilight lassitude, he doesn't have a head at all. On Rumsgate's shoulders sat the sign over the main gate of the Acme Lead Works, the Acme Lead Works in the rain in September . . .

In Septe . . .

In Septem . . .

September!

IT BURST from the back of the whirl of his mind: *September*.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars stashed in a three-wheel icecream truck labelled Yum-O FreezieTreats.

Pedalling away down the rainy road . . .

Ding-a-linging his bell in triumph.

Roadblock.

Federal men.

Vendor back from vacation,
but too late, tri-wheeler stolen,
too late to alter plan . . .

Worked anyway . . .

Greatest coup . . .

Until . . .

Pedalling, pedalling . . .

No reverse gears on Freezie-
Treats wagons . . .

Manacles . . .

Dark rooms . . .

Guilt, shouting guilt:

Yes (Randolf heard himself
crying in that rainy September
in the darkness of his mind) *yes,*
you sons of satan, I foxed you
again!

Too bad (whispered ghost voices).
Too bad. So colorful.

One of the last (went the whispering
voices blowing through his dimming
head). *The last, the the last. The last of the great.*

Penological triumph (keened a ghost-
choir). *Break down the walls. Rebuild the personality.*
Disassociate. Assimilate. Integrate.

SOCIALIZE.

—reporting from geographical selector, chief (CHIEFCHIEF-CHIEFCHIEF went the dark black echo down the fast-failing electrical paths of his reworked, muddled, tired head) *and we find* (FINDFINDFINDFIND) *ideal—re-adjustment—environment—Pine* (PINEPINEPINEPINE)—

For one virtually unbearable fraction of time Randolf Mellors stared again into the looming

erudite eyes of the psychosocializer who had leaned over him in a room tiled in green and lowered the face mask for the submerging.

The eyes . . . *the eyes* . . .

Guilt.

Guilt.

GUILT!

They just couldn't make the eyes benevolent. Writhing (they had strapped him, he remembered in a roman candle burst of remembering) he saw the eyes blaze guilt which already, as the hormones and the enzymes and the catalyzers bubbled through him in the first moments of social metamorphosis, already he had come to loathe.

Guilt; he loathed guilt.

But you sonsofbitches (he shrieked before they gassed him all the way into being somebody else entirely) *you're making me so damn dull* (LL . . . LL . . . LL) . . .

AT sundown, a great red sun-down suggestive of far places waiting beyond the pine hills, the Excalibur Special Touring Saloon was parked on a bluff overlooking Lumpkin's cross-roads store, but concealed behind a sufficient quantity of trees so that observation could be carried on discreetly. A panel in the rear fin had been opened, from which a spring steel trellis shot forth a powerful optical tube.

Through this instrument Harlow B. C. Banner was now observing the interior of the store.

Distantly through the still, crisp air came the putt of a flivver. Banner clicked his false teeth in exultation.

"What's he doing now?" asked Dr. Kloog. In point of fact, Dr. Kloog actually said, "Wuzzydoo-now?", as a result of the reward given him by Banner following the surreptitious re-direction of personality that took four hours. This reward was a fifth of premium Scotch whisky. Insatiable and triumphant, Dr. Kloog had also consumed a pint of rubbing alcohol out of the medical supplies. He was even now suggestively eyeing the tin of canned heat bubbling over which their dinner cooked.

"Writing a note." Chuckling, Banner screwed the lens adjustment so that he could peer more effectively inside Lumpkin's. "Wait, I'll be able to read in a minute—"

"Delicious," came the piping cry of Dr. Rumsgate somewhere within the tonneau of the vehicle. Dr. Rumsgate had not bothered to convert the tonneau back from an electronic operating pad into conventional seats. In fact it was his particular reward to be able to leave the pad up a while, and conduct some sort of procedure which Banner didn't care to inquire about.

"Just as I thought!" Banner exclaimed. "He's writing a fare well note to Lumpkin. Now he's coming out. Locking the store, and—oh-oh. Car pulling up. Blasted woman. Getting her buggy out, too."

"Bassids," belched Dr. Kloog, in reference to his former faculty colleagues. He gestured flamboyantly with his empty pint of spirits. "All bassids. Jus' because man geds de-licen don' mean he don' know how 'just personality . . ."

"Don't pat yourself on the back," sneered Banner, furiously adjusting the eyepiece. "He was easy. After all, he had strong anti-social drives."

"Has," Kloog corrected with several lurches. "'Z goddam bag."

Banner refused to pay further attention to his disreputable comrades. The scene captured within the circle of the lens fascinated him. Randolph Mellors had emerged from Lumpkin's Emporium just as Miz Mudgerock wheeled her perambulator up the sidewalk and kicked on the foot-brake. Mellors was standing in the winy red sunlight, one thumb hooked rakishly in his belt, his other index finger through the eyelet of his coat, the coat over his shoulder.

Whatever the woman desired in the store, Mellors told her to get it herself, with an insolent

jerk of his thumb. She scuttled out of sight. Glancing in all directions, Randolph Mellors leaned over the pram. In a twinkling he darted back popping half a peppermint stick into his mouth.

EVEN from high on the bluff Harlow B. C. Banner could hear a faint squall of protest. Mellors stepped off the sidewalk into the dust. He turned beside the gas pump and thumbed his nose at Lumpkin's. Then, swinging his coat and whistling, he walked up County Highway #2 into the sunset.

"He *smiled!*" Banner shrieked joyfully. "He actually *smiled!* Ah, in a month, maybe less, the crimes—the delicious crimes."

Banner snapped his fingers.

"All right, Kloog, Rumsgate—pack up! On to the next town.

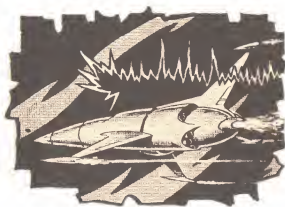
We've got that sex degenerate. I'll teach those bureaucrats!" Righteously, Banner shook his fist at the reddening pines. "Try to stamp out crime, will they? Try to adjust criminals into goodie-goodies, will they? Illegal or not, I'll show them they can't tamper with free enterprise—destroy what I built!"

"Wunnerful," said Dr. Kloog. "Wunnerful for me, wunnerful for you."

"You bet it's wonderful!" cried the little old mummy. "After ten years of bureaucracy—near bankruptcy—" He clamped hands on the oversized Kloog and his whole larcenous face was illumined. "—finally, *finally*, Banner Newspapers will once again have some news that's fit to print!"

THE END

PATTERN



Sometimes the only way to fight fire is with fire.

***One can hardly stop to consider what the
second fire may destroy. Can one?***

RAHLL floated, a dim pattern of electrical impulse in the void of space. He was vaguely aware that he was dying into nothingness, and that in a short time he would be a meaningless mass of aimless patterning, with no consciousness and no unity. But there was nothing that could be done about it; his flexible impulse had woven itself into millions upon millions of varying thought-forms, and no solution to

his situation had presented itself.

His impulse writhed into remembrance of the Great Pattern of countless centuries before. There had been thousands of impulses similar to himself, all banded together into one huge, unified Form, standing in this wasteland of space; thousands of impulses, all twisting in the shaping and reshaping of their own thoughts and emotions, but all connected by the central Great

By **ROBERT H. ROHRER, JR.**

Illustrated by **ADKINS**



Pattern so that they stood, impulse to impulse, in a huge, delicately crystal-like structure of electricity.

And they had given each other life, replenishing their powers within themselves, and existing in the contentment of peace, for millennium upon millennium.

Until the Cataclysm. There had been some impulses who tired of the old pattern of unification, and wished to form a new one; however, they were opposed by other, more content impulses, who stubbornly held to the old pattern. The rebels, as they were called, formed their carefully planned new pattern in spite of the opposition; the result being that the two different patterns intertwined each other, fell into antagonizing frequencies, and blew the community apart.

ONLY Rahll's delicate impulse had escaped this Cataclysm. He had been badly wounded, unable to move in any direction; so for thousands of years after the explosion he had floated in darkness, waiting for a sign of another impulse with which to make contact and create mutual sustenance. But no sign had come, and Rahll's shape had slowly become warped with weakness and hunger into the jagged form of a pattern which had never been seen in the old community.

The pattern of a cannibal.

The only central thought-form which activated him now was to Find Impulse and to Absorb Impulse; to absorb flexible impulse into his wavering frame and twist it to his own form, so he would live, so he could exist for a while longer, so he could branch out and find more flexible impulse to eat and twist to his pattern.

But the long process of disintegration was now almost at an end; he could reshape his thought-patterns only with the greatest pain and difficulty, and branching out was out of the question. He realized this, and slowly prepared himself for the final pattern to come; the pattern of death.

As his faint, blue shape of line-impulse reformed within itself, however, he became conscious of a weak, almost nonexistent impulse beating against the outer fringe of his pattern. He stopped his reforming process and, summoning all the power he could, glided toward the impulse.

When he did this, the impulse became definitely stronger; slowly his delicate, crystalloid form became more and more conscious of it; its power rose and rose, until it reached an almost unbearable intensity.

Waves of hunger beat against Rahll, as they had for centuries; but here, here at last, was satisfaction. His jagged cannibal's

pattern roused itself, waiting for the new impulse to come within striking distance. And then . . .

It stopped. It had been there for only a moment, and now it was gone. Rahll desperately sent out tendrils of a length he had thought he would never attain again in search of the huge impulse, and found . . .

Another. This one was smaller, although still one hundred times as powerful as Rahll's; and, oddly, it was channelled into five separate spokes of impulse which functioned around a large central hub-impulse. The impulses in the five channels were exactly alike, but they were interpreted differently by the central hub due to the different channels through which they came. Rahll sorted and distinguished these five interpretations, his pattern weaving into one of curiosity and vague dismay as he did.

One channel of impulse was evidently devoted to the sensing of forms and colors, something which Rahll found unnecessary; a second was one which sensed vibrations in — in something, a substance Rahll was unfamiliar with, one with more substance than the void he lived in and yet unsolid enough to carry vibrations easily; a third existed to sense odors in this unsolid substance; a fourth to sense some things which Rahll did not recognize, bitter, salt, sweet, and

sour; and a fifth to sense heat and cold. All these impulses transmitted their sensings to the central hub, which seemed to be a completely flexible mass of unpatterned, vari-frequencied electrical impulses that was almost overpoweringly strong.

Yes, these were food for Rahll; but two factors held him from consuming all six branches of impulse together.

THE first was that he was so weak that any more than one of the spoke-impulses absorbed at a time would have shattered his frail form.

The second was that this collective impulse operated on a frequency altogether different from Rahll's. Try as he might, Rahll could not emulate this frequency; it was too alien, too far removed from his own, and he was too weak. But this impulse's frequency was flexible; if he could make it become harmonious with his own frequency, then he could easily absorb it, branch by branch.

It would be a relatively simple matter to make the impulse harmonize with him, Rahll knew; all he had to do was make the flexible-frequencied impulse accept his own impulse as something unalien and natural, by taking a form the impulse would not suspect; something which blended with the impulse's environment.

As soon as a branch of the alien impulse accepted Rahl's own impulse as natural, Rahl would move blocks into the channels of that branch and absorb it.

First he examined the branch devoted to sensing odors. Yes, it would be child's play to cause an impulse to transmit through the odor channels to the central hub, where it would be interpreted as an odor . . .

BRENNER sat hunched over the controls of the spaceship. Damm! How had he gotten so far away from Base? There weren't any planets here for millions of miles in all directions; only blackness. He couldn't make connection with Base; he couldn't make connection with anything.

His small, three-compartmented ship sped swiftly along toward nothing. In the tail compartment, the atomic and the electrical generators hummed serenely; in the nose compartment, Brenner continued to curse.

Something in the mechanism of his directional equipment was fouled up. That must be it. He decided to cut power and think for a while.

He closed off the atomic generator, stopping the rockets, and, as an afterthought, shut off the electrical generator also. Sitting in the darkness, he tried vainly to make out some light in the void beyond the nose observation

window. But he could see nothing. No stars, no planets. Nothing at all. Base had been built in deep space; all light from other suns was cut off here by time and distance.

He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. Hale at Base was probably tearing his hair out. Brenner could hear the old man now: "That blasted Brenner! Here we are, a space station a million miles from anywhere, and he has to lose our best craft for us! I knew that blinkety-blank halfwit would pull some lame-brained stunt like this. I knew it, I knew it, I . . ."

Brenner cut Hale off and began to think about Earth. And home. And Barbara. And the nameless little thing who must have come months ago, and whom he would have seen within a year if he hadn't been so Godawful stupid as to lose himself out here.

Well, at least he had the radio. And a good supply of food. And the knowledge that Hale would be keeping all channels clear for a call from him.

He frowned. He should have been able to make radio contact with Base long before this. Perhaps his trouble was in the radio . . .

Suddenly a strange odor touched his senses. Brenner frowned, sniffing. He'd never smelled anything like that before. It was rather metallic—almost

like a short circuit. But not quite.

And then, gradually, the odor became that of coffee. Hot Coffee, percolating somewhere in the ship. He had put some coffee on, hadn't he? He frowned, and then went back to his former thoughts of self-disparagement, accepting the odor as normal, as part of his natural environment, "forgetting" about it.

The first block moved in.

Brenner hardly noticed that he had lost his sense of smell.

RAHLL exulted. This was the first impulse he had ever tasted—his jagged cannibal's pattern contracted itself in ecstasy as he twisted the absorbed impulse into his own thought-form. He was still hungry, yes—and that hunger was hardly on the way to being satisfied—but at least this was a beginning. It fired him on—he must have more impulse, more, until he could branch out and find even more . . .

The hunger rushed over him in waves, deep, welling up from the pit of his thought-pattern, almost overcoming his form with its intensity. Yes, he would have more. Taking the first impulse had been simple; as soon as this other being had accepted the bogus odor as being normal, his frequency had become harmonious with Rahll's, and Rahll had moved

a block into the channels through which the impulse flowed and absorbed the impulse. Now the block remained in those odor-channels, preventing other impulse from travelling in them.

Rahll turned his attention to the satisfaction of his hunger.

Brenner sniffed. That's funny—hadn't he smelled coffee a minute ago?

Wait a minute—he couldn't have smelled coffee. There wasn't any coffee on. But there must have been, because he'd smelled it.

He sniffed again. He couldn't smell anything now. Odd. He leaned back in his chair and listened as the atomic and electric generators hummed in the background . . .

The second block moved in.

The sound of the generators disappeared.

Brenner started. But he couldn't have heard the generators—they were off! He rose. All was silent in the ship. He banged on the control panel with his fist.

He heard no sound.

Panic set in.

RAHLL's cannibal-pattern contracted and protracted in the black void. The faint blue lines of his form glowed a bit more strongly now than they had before, although the great hunger still shook his frame.

His thought-forms wove in and out in visions of power, a power he had never thought of possessing back in the time of the Great Pattern, a power with which he could absorb everything, every—

And then Rahll's thought-form twisted into a totally unfamiliar shape. And he thought of Hale.

He could picture Hale only vaguely; a big man—man; that was a new term—a big man, whatever a man was, with a deep voice—voice, another new term—and a great temper—temper . . .

Rahll slowed his pattern in confusion. Man, voice, temper, Hale—all of these; he had never been aware of them before, nor of things like them. Why was he aware of them now?

AND then he realized why. This alien being's patterns, even though scattered and unmethodical, were influencing Rahll's patterns as Rahll came into close contact with them during the process of absorption. Just as Rahll's patterns must be influencing this alien being's.

Rahll formed and reformed thoughts for a moment, and then decided that this was a good thing. For now he would have new weapons with which to trick this other electrical impulse; new and better weapons. Hale, man, voice, temper.

At that moment, Brenner was

experiencing much the same phenomenon as Rahll was.

Brenner's panic died suddenly as he searched his thoughts and found, with a shock, that he knew why he could not hear. He could see the answer only dimly, but it was there; something completely alien to him, something outside the ship, a crystallike pattern of electricity—of electrical impulse—was—was doing something else alien to him which had caused him to lose his sense of sound.

He sat down and concentrated on this answer. There must be more to it, he thought, more to it than . . . Yes, there was more to it. He received jumbled thoughts concerning frequencies alien to each other, and then pulled out the one totally clear impression he had. Illusions were being used to dupe him. He wasn't quite sure of exactly how they were being used—something to do with alien frequencies cropped up again—but he did know that the alien being outside his ship was using illusion to slowly destroy him. But wasn't there a way out?

Yes, there was. If he didn't accept the illusion, whatever it was, as being normal, he could not be touched by this creature outside. If he did not accept the illusion as being normal . . .

Brenner turned on the electric generator. The room flooded with light.

Rahll tensed when he felt the other, larger impulse that he had first felt rise up again. The impulse was far too huge to absorb; and, furthermore, there was something about it that almost repelled Rahll. It was impulse, yes, but it was a different kind of impulse, of a type Rahll had not run across before. If he had been strong enough he could have consumed it, but he was not sure that he would have wanted to.

He steeled himself against the overpowering sense of the presence of that impulse, and carefully searched out the other, smaller one. When he found it, he began to think. Certainly this being's impulse had picked up the pattern which Rahll was following; therefore this being would be on his guard against Rahll's simulations of his environment. Rahll had to sneak under that guard, carefully, subtly, in as unnoticable a way as possible.

He felt that he could absorb two channels of impulse this time. He picked the two, and began to weave rhythmically in thought.

BRENNER sat back in his chair. He was ready for the thing, whatever it was. It would not creep under his defenses. Nothing it could do, no illusion it could form, would take him in. He would not allow it to. He could not allow it to; for patterns had

been invoked in his mind that suggested what the creature would do with the power derived from Brenner's impulse if it ever absorbed it all; patterns which pictured the absorption of all life on other worlds, and a single great pattern of electrical current crisscrossing in spiderweb fashion throughout the universe; a strong, unbreakable chain of intelligence, sated with the impulse of every fish, bird, insect, and man in existence. Brenner suppressed a shudder. What he was up against might be too much for him to handle . . .

No. He had to handle it. For Barbara's sake. For Hale's sake. For the sake of all those men back at Base, who would be the creature's next prey if it destroyed Brenner.

Suddenly there was a clanking noise. Brenner stiffened, for he did not hear the sound with his useless ears; it formed within his mind. The gruff, temper-tinged voice he heard came from within his mind, too; "Brenner, you damned fool. I knew you'd get yourself into a fix like this. Our best craft, too." Brenner whirled around.

The tall, heavy-set figure of Hale stood by the airlock, smiling.

Brenner frowned. The alien must be a complete fool; Brenner would never accept a bogus Captain Hale where Captain Hale could not be.

Hale's figure strode forward, saying, with that fixed smile on its face, "I always thought you'd wind up like this: lost in deep space, with nothing around you. Have you looked at that radio? Sure it's not what's on the blink? Oh, that's right, you wouldn't be able to hear it even if it was in good shape," the words flowed through Brenner's head, "wouldn't be able to. Have a cigar, while you stand there thinking. You're going to have to think hard to get out of this one, Brenner. Mighty blasted hard." And a deep chuckle shook Brenner's skull as the figure of Hale opened its mouth to laugh—and opened it, grotesquely, a trifle too far for a genuine human mouth to go.

BRENNER puffed at the proffered cigar. Something was wrong here—the alien could not be this obvious in his working. Brenner's mind steadily refused to accept the thing that stood before him.

The figure cocked an eye at him. "If you don't get back to the station," it said, "you'll never see Barbara again. Or the kid. You know that, don't you? And you want to see Barbara don't you? Don't you?"

Brenner did not answer.

The figure smiled. "Well, you can see her, if you want to. Right now." And the figure's body and face grew smaller, softened in

their lines, and the clothing it wore changed from a severe blue uniform to a light blue dress. "Hello, Will," said Barbara's figure.

Brenner still kept silent, staring at the woman's form before him. It was so *like* her—and in its arms it held a small bundle, which gurgled softly. Brenner's eyes fell to this bundle.

Barbara's figure saw the direction of his glance. "You haven't seen the baby yet, have you, Will?" she said, moving toward him. "Look." She held the small bundle out toward him.

But as she did, one of her hands dug into the blankets wrapped around the tiny form, wrenched the form from those blankets, and threw it to the floor. Barbara's face, now covered with a too-wide grin, looked up at Brenner as her feet stamped the small figure to a red pulp. "Look, Will," she said, and laughed, stretching her mouth wider, wider, until her face was distorted completely out of shape, and her black hair streamed wildly in the air.

Brenner stood paralyzed. The laughter was filling his mind, overcrowding everything else, becoming louder, and louder, and . . .

It stopped. The red pulp on the floor disappeared, as did the other gnarled figure. All was silent, as it had been before.

Gone. The creature was gone,

and it had not hurt him at all. Brenner, still rooted in shock, took a few more thoughtless puffs on the cigar the alien had handed him.

The third and fourth blocks moved into place.

The cigar disappeared.

Brenner could no longer feel or taste.

RAHLL rolled in the darkness, his blue line-form glowing more strongly than before. His cannibal pattern flowed into the thought of all the impulse in the universe around him; of the time when he would be able to branch out, find the stars which were concealed here by distance and time, and absorb the many life-impulses living around those stars, satisfying completely the burning hunger within him.

His third plan had worked admirably. He had shocked the other being with obtrusive actions into a state in which he did not notice inobtrusive actions. That would work again.

He was still bothered by the other, huge impulse which throbbed against his pattern; it seemed strangely adamant and . . . But he couldn't find the exact word for what repelled him.

He pushed the pattern aside. Enough time to worry about that after he had absorbed the fifth branch of impulse of the alien being nearby.

Again, Rahl's thoughts turned to a method of operation. What illusion to form now . . .?

Brenner sat in the nose section of the ship, his head throbbing. The alien's visions of power were now perfectly clear in his mind, but for some reason they did not bother him any more. He had been tricked by that thing outside; he had to fight back somehow. That and that alone mattered now.

And a way to fight back was slowly creeping into his thoughts; some formless fear the being had of the impulses formed by the electric generator. Perhaps if he could trick the alien into . . .

Whang! A loud noise cut through his mind.

He jumped up and turned toward the back of the compartment; just in time to see a shadow flick through and close the door there.

He ran to the back, turned the wheel in the center of the door, pulled the door open, and staggered into the second compartment. Whang! Something hit him across the back of his neck. He jerked and crashed to the floor, fighting to maintain consciousness.

With a desperate lunge, he grabbed at the wall and pulled himself to his feet. Then he looked to the back of the second compartment, just in time to see

the shadow flick through the door.

He dashed through the doorway into the third compartment. For a second Barbara's face grinned impishly at him from the door at the end of the room, and then disappeared. Brenner plunged to the doorway through which she had gone and jumped into the fourth compartment.

For a moment he stood looking around the completely empty room.

Then the fifth block moved into place.

Brenner could not see.

It was then that he remembered that his ship had only three compartments.

SOMEHOW he made his way back to the nose compartment. He was completely cut off from the rest of his body by Rahll's five blocks; only his seat of thought remained. And if that were taken away . . .

He seemed to be able to *sense* objects about him, although he could neither see nor feel them; but he did not stop to try to understand this. Instead, he sat down and began to concentrate. To concentrate on further scraps of information that had been left with him by this last close contact with Rahll; information which pointed toward a possible way of stopping the thing outside.

He had received before the impression of Rahll's half-fear of the electrical impulses formed by the generator of the ship; now he was fairly certain of the reasons for Rahll's reluctance to absorb these impulses.

In the first place, they were too strong for Rahll's thus far underdeveloped body.

In the second, they were inflexible. True, if Brenner turned a dial he could change their amperage, but they were formed on a basis of friction, not of chemical reaction, as Brenner's and Rahll's impulses were. The generator's impulses were not stimulated by certain stimuli at certain times, but flew from the generator in a continuous, hard, stable stream, inflexible, unable to be woven about into thought patterns, unable to be twisted by Rahll.

And this told Brenner how to stop the alien.

Sensing his way, he reached a medicine cabinet, and sensed out a bottle of morphine; carefully he measured out the right amount, and set it on a table beside the equipment that controlled the electrical generator.

Then Brenner began to slow the generator down. The lights dimmed, becoming lower and lower. . . .

He knew that Rahll was waiting outside, waiting to consume the last weak impulse in Bren-

ner's body; he also knew that Rahll would probably automatically consume any electrical impulse of a frequency harmonious with the creature's that was of the same level as Brenner's without noticing that it came from a generator instead of Brenner, because of the hunger that threatened to overpower Rahll and render him insensible in the lust for food.

Brenner continued to lower the speed of the generator. He also knew that Rahll would not be deceived if there were two separate impulses on the same level to distinguish between. In that case, Rahll would undoubtedly pick out Brenner's because of Brenner's alien frequency. So Brenner had to lower his own impulse. He had to lower it to its most basic function; that of causing the heart to beat.

He took a glass of water and swallowed the morphine.

As the haze began to blot out his thoughts, he continued to turn the generator down, down . . .

RAHLL sensed the drop in the larger electrical impulse; he followed it as it dropped, until it was on the same level as the other impulse was. Wait! What other impulse?

Rahll's thought-patterns stopped in confusion. This current was the *only* impulse on the

same level as the alien one. Rahll pondered for a moment; if this was the only impulse on the right level, then he must have confused the two impulses for a moment, and this was actually the right one. Yes, that had to be it.

He examined the impulse, sensing around it—and his crystal-shaped form jumped in surprise. The alien frequency which he had had to trick by illusions into becoming harmonious with his own was gone from this impulse. He would be able to absorb this impulse at his will. True, there was something familiarly repulsive about it, but he was hungry, and . . .

After only a short hesitation, Rahll's electric jaws opened, widened to full size, and closed greedily on the impulse.

Too late he realized his mistake. His puny blocks were unable to hold up against the continuous, non-chemically produced stream of electricity from the generator. More and more impulse flowed into his body, more and more *inflexible* impulse, which he could not twist into his cannibal's thought-pattern, torrents of perfectly stable electricity, slowly influencing his own pattern as he had expected to influence the impulse, influencing his into a frozen, stable, inflexible pattern of continuous hunger-satisfaction.

His crystalloid jaws spread wide, Rahll floated in the black

void of space, motionless, unable to move, unable to twist into new thought-patterns, and therefore unable to think. The inflexible current of electricity poured steadily into his body . . .

* * *

Slowly the effects of the morphine wore off, and the haze lifted from Brenner's mind. As his power to think returned, he began to realize that his plan had worked, and that the alien had been overcome; and he was glad of this only because it removed him, Brenner, from danger. He no longer cared that the creature might have absorbed the impulses of every living being in existence; the thing was frozen, and he was safe from it—that was all that mattered to him.

Of course he could not see, or feel, or hear the motionless crystalloid pattern outside. But he knew it was there. He could *sense* it.

He could *sense* it because his heretofore unmethodical hub-impulse pattern, in its close associa-

tion with Rahll's, had been slowly twisted and molded into a form very much like the alien's, giving him Rahll's powers of sightless observation of other impulses and objects. Brenner no longer had any need for his lost powers of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

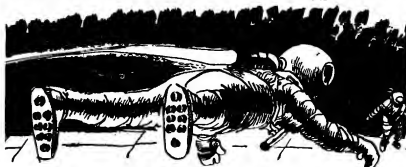
He groped his way back to the nose seat, sensing his way as he could not feel it. He would find Base—he would be able to sense the way back to it as soon as it was close enough. He would go back to Base, because, naturally, his *basic* thought-form had also been molded into the shape of Rahll's; and Brenner was hungry, and he knew he could find food at Base.

Food. He pictured Hale, and the other men at the station.

Food. His jagged cannibal's pattern contracted in ecstasy at the thought of it.

He activated the atomic generator and whirled the ship around.

THE END



**Above him were a thousand different-colored moons.
Beside him was the girl. Across the room the dragon
glowered. And outside, not far away, was . . .**

World Edge

By JACK EGAN

Illustrated by FINLAY



HARVEY CRANE was lying flat on his back, though how he had gotten there he was still trying to figure out. Above him he could see the flat pink half-sphere of the sky. Now, *that* bothered him. He squinted up at it for several more minutes before deciding it was the color that was wrong somehow. Harvey hunched up into a sitting position, yawned widely, and gazed around. Thirty yards to his left a stand of blue and yellow trees, triangular in shape, effectively blocked the horizon. In

front of him a tapered cylinder, balanced gracefully on its nose, performed the same function. To his right . . . there was no horizon!

"God damn," said Harvey Crane.

He crawled the ten feet or so to the Edge of the World and looked down. The all-pervading rosiness swirled below. Harvey tightened his belt to hold his stomach in place, inched far back from the Edge, and stood shakily up.

It was then that he noticed the girl.

She stood with hands on hips, critically appraising the ship.

Aha! The ship! That's what it is, Harvey thought triumphantly.

"I see you tried to land it again," the girl said dryly. *Again?* Harvey wondered, but said nothing. She walked over to the ship, lifted the gargantuan structure by a wingtip, and scowled back at him.

"Well, don't just stand there like an idiot. Come give me a hand."

He was surprised at the ease with which they handled the rocket. They soon had it righted, and the girl stood back and gazed at it worryingly.

"There," she said. It sounded final. A look of vague annoyance crossed her pretty features. She shook her long, brown hair into

place, flicked an imaginary speck of dust off her spotless white trousers, rolled the sleeves of her blouse up, and . . . erased the ship.

"*Hey!*" shouted Harvey wildly, "You can't do that!" He stared in dumb amazement at the fading after-image of the ship. Beyond it, the long upward slope of the yellow, grassy hill was crowned by a huge Castle.

"Don't be silly, Harvey dear. Come on, it's playtime." He followed her, for some reason, up the slope to the Palace.

PLAYTIME, Harvey learned, consisted of a pleasant swim in the purple waters of the Palace moat, followed by a delicious feast of some sort of orange fruit faintly resembling wax-covered ladybugs. They—he and the girl and a pet animal with a disturbing tendency to change shape every three seconds—were seated in a rather large floral garden (there was a faunal one somewhere nearby, Harvey learned), gazing. That is to say, the girl was gazing at the garden, the animal at Harvey, and Harvey at *her*. It must have been a pleasant experience all around, for they started laughing after a few minutes.

"Say," Harvey said, standing. "I don't have the faintest idea who I am, where I am, or why, but . . . *who are you?*"

She bit her lip, and said with forced gaiety, "My goodness, Harvey. Don't you remember? No, I suppose you don't. Well, I'm . . . Dana. Tell me, Harvey," she walked over to him and looked into his eyes. "How much do you remember?"

Harvey stopped smiling, frowned, rubbed a hand through his black hair. "Not much," he admitted, staring out the Palace window. "I keep having the feeling that if I *try* hard enough . . . but, I'm not sure I want to remember," he finished, puzzled.

"Now, Harvey," Dana laughed and put her arms around him. "You're here now, and that's all that matters. You've always been here." Harvey looked down at her fondly.

"Tsk tsK," he pronounced. "Now you *have* aroused my curiosity." He kissed her, felt an imperious snap at his pantleg, and turned to find an amazing likeness of a dragon turning a burning gaze at his exposed calf. "Hey!" he shouted, and jumped.

"Timothy!" Dana shouted, and the dragon reverted to her pet animal. She turned back to Harvey. "I'm so sorry, Harvey. Timothy is really very fond of you."

"He has an odd way of showing it," Harvey growled.

The pinkness of the outer world suddenly changed to a deep aquamarine.

"Oh dear," sighed Dana.

"Night already, and I haven't made up the bed. I suppose we can sleep on the cot tonight," she said tentatively.

"We?"

"Oh. I forgot. You just got here today, didn't you," she said absently, a little rankled. "Well, you can have the cot tonight, Harvey. We have *so* much to do the rest of our lives."

Harvey felt so suddenly overcome with weariness he didn't think to ask her just what it was they had so much of. He followed her docilely down a blue-lighted corridor and out onto a small balcony. A low cot, lined with silk and complete with canopy, reposed in the exact center of the porch. He turned to say good-night to Dana and found her already gone. The little Changeling sat panting in her place, its multi-morphic form vibrating slightly. Harvey grinned down at its angry dwarfish stare.

"Jealous, eh?" he said.

The bathroom was off to the right side of the balcony. Harvey found he needed nothing but a drink of water—it was purple. His chin showed no signs of erupting in its usual forest of thick, dark hairs. He swore good-naturedly at this (it had been his intention to grow a beard), put his razor away, and undressed for bed. A pair of loose, soft pajamas of neutral color lay across the cot. They fit him.

THE aqua sky showed thousands of vari-shaped blobs that whirled crazily overhead; he at first mistook them for clouds. Gradually it became apparent that they were moons, each a different color. Somehow the glinting gold one seemed familiar to him. Finally he gave up trying to chase down a forgotten memory and looked past them to the stars.

Now, what were stars? Harvey stared at the powder sprinkled across the sky. He *must* know what they are; he knew what they were called, didn't he? Or had he just imagined the name—made it up himself?

"Greeeeep," the Changeling said softly. Harvey switched his gaze from the sky to the outstretched form of a bear rug lying on the floor beside the cot. "Greeeeep." Hmmm. The Changeling's body was barely vibrating. It must be asleep.

Harvey watched the animal for several minutes. A faint blue breeze sighed through the parapets of the Palace mounting above him. Below, in the courtyard, he heard the stealthy rattle of chains.

Ghosts? His mind rejected the possibility at once. He had never believed in them before—why start now? His mind worked furiously as the sound halted. Bridge. Drawbridge. He recalled seeing a drawbridge across the

moat when Dana had led him swimming yesterday . . . only, *they* had entered through a small door set flush with the surface of the water. Someone must be letting the drawbridge down, and it had to be Dana. Harvey raised up on his elbow and carefully put a foot over the edge of the cot. He crept to the railing of the balcony and looked down eighty feet of blue emptiness to the yellowness of the hill. Down it, a cloaked figure followed a crooked path to the Edge of the World. *Dana.*

Something sparked an irrational fear in Harvey as the figure grew smaller with distance. He wrapped his robe about him, slipped into his flight shoes (*there* was something to examine later. Where had he gotten those words?), and dodged into a hallway. All roads led to the courtyard, Harvey knew. At least, all *that he* had covered. He cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder to see if the Changeling had followed him, then wondered at his apprehension. His memory of existence went back less than twenty-four hours, and this bothered him. He should have thought more about what the *ship* was, rather than *where* he was, he thought self-deprecatingly. But Dana had to be going somewhere, and in this world, bounded so tightly by Infinity, there was nothing left to do but

wonder where the hell she was going. He halted in the courtyard, located the path to the drawbridge, and found the drawbridge closed.

Yeep! Harvey thought. Either Dana was already back, or she had someone or something here to draw the bridge up after her departure. He whirled, saw nothing, and ran back to the garden, retracing their steps of yesterday to the small door unhinging out onto the moat. He stripped down to his trunks and slid out into the chill purple of the water.

IT became immediately obvious that swimming was *not* a nighttime sport. The water was extremely cold (Harvey twice bumped into floating cakes of ice), and harbored a species of life that, while seemingly harmless, certainly *felt* horrible. He pulled himself out on the far side and sat chattering for several minutes, massaging his legs. Somewhere on that small plain of grass, dear old Dana was up to something. And Harvey felt it imperative that he know *what*.

He shuddered to his feet and gaped back at the Castle. In the crazy lights of the whirling moons, shadows danced and played in the deep gouges of balconies and alcoves. The ramparts themselves stabbed into the night sky like the many-pointed noses of rockets on a spacefield.

Spacefield? Rockets? What?

A dim wave of remembrance washed over Harvey. He clenched his fists and tried to think. He tore at the black veil over the past with mental fingers, and it resisted. He opened his eyes and found himself running down the esplanade toward the spot where he had regained consciousness the day before. He slowed to a walk, hoping the crazily darting, heterochromatic moons would hide his mobile shadow among the moving shadows of the fixed plants and rocks.

Near the place where he had first met her, Dana halted and looked behind her. Harvey darted into the dubious shelter of a triangle tree and stopped, waiting breathlessly for her call of discovery. Nothing happened, and a few moments later he chanced a look.

A row of three eyes stared coldly in his face.

Harvey jerked back, shuddered to fight back a yell, and ran madly down the hill toward Dana, but she was no longer in sight. For one wild second Harvey thought she had disappeared over the Edge. A look confirmed the fallacy of the notion. But behind him, the three floating red eyes stared impassively. Angrily, he wrenched them from the air and flung the glowing coals out into Infinity, and had the satisfaction of watching them dwindle.

dle into nothing. He had no idea what they were; all he knew was he hadn't liked them.

Disappointed at having lost Dana, he started back up the hill toward the Castle.

Thud!

HARVEY picked himself up off the ground and explored the night air in front of him with wary hands. He encountered solid surface and felt his way around it, astonished. It was the ship! Dana had done nothing but render it invisible yesterday! He located the rocket tubes and the heavy arches of the landing fins, and looked up when he judged he should be under the airlock. A sudden, frightful flood of memory poured over him.

My God! *Earth! The Universe! Me!*

"Harvey?"

Silence. He squatted down under the rocket's firing flange, hidden from view of the airlock.

"Harvey dear, is that you?" A light sprang out of the air twenty feet above the ground. Dana stood in breath-taking silhouette in a rectangular frame of familiar white. Harvey realized it was the first time since . . . since *the crash!* . . . since the crash that he had seen *white* light. White, the symbol of truth. He straightened, still under the flange, and waited while Dana decided to come down and look

around. He would soon get the truth.

"Harvey?"

He tensed as her shapely legs appeared, carefully feeling for the rungs of an invisible ladder. When she reached the ground, Harvey stepped around the exhaust flange and flung himself on her. They landed in the yellow turf, and Harvey found without surprise he faced a formidable opponent. Whatever the force that had enabled her to lift the ship yesterday proved equally useful against flesh; but Harvey found he also possessed new strength. His eyes fell on the tiny metal case strapped to her waist.

A Matter Disorganizer!

"Harvey! Stop it, Harvey! *You don't know what you're doing!*" she screamed. He laughed harshly and finally succeeded in wrenching the little metal box away from her.

"You were going to destroy the ship," he shouted incredulously. "In God's name, *why?*"

She stepped back from him, tears glistening in her eyes. "To keep . . . this from happening," she panted. She turned and yelled something at the Castle.

In the weird moonlights, a huge flying monster dragged itself from the topmost pinnacle and came in a banshee wail toward Harvey. He put down his fear and aimed the Matter Dis-

organizer carefully. The huge yawning mouth gaped out at him as he pulled the actuator. The banshee scream stopped abruptly; the monster vanished. Dana fell to her knees sobbing. "You've killed him! You've killed Timothy," she cried.

Harvey turned back to the ridiculous rectangle of white radiance suspended in mid-air and adjusted the MD's energy span. The solid metal walls of the rocket reared into the night sky.

"All right, Dana," Harvey said coldly, turning to the kneeling woman. "Where am I, and what's going on here?"

"I—I suppose I should tell you now," she choked out, standing without his help. Harvey felt suddenly cold. The night wind had ceased, and a blue heatlessness settled over the yellow field. Even the moons lost some of their giddy fervor.

"Go on. I'm listening." He felt his voice soften, and rebelled. He had been subservient for too long in this crazy world, he realized. He felt something else was necessary. "I remember now," he stated.

DANA sucked in her breath and stared at him longingly. "Oh Harvey, darling. I've lost you so many times already. Must we go through it again?" she said sadly. Harvey said nothing.

Her shoulders sagged. "Very well. It isn't a long story. You remember Earth, Harvey? Your Earth?"

"I remember."

"You know why you came . . . here?"

"No."

"Look at your ship, Harvey. It's old. It is *very* old. I'm going to tell you something. Something you already know, but won't admit to yourself . . ."

A frightened look appeared in Harvey's eyes.

"Well, go on. Tell me," he shouted impatiently, fearfully.

"After your ship left Earth, Harvey, it jumped the Light Barrier. But you and the others hadn't counted on the forces involved; everything but the *man* was designed to take that jump. *You never came out of Overdrive, Harvey. You're still in that ship, and you'll never wake up!*" She laughed/cried at Harvey's twisted face.

"You're crazy!" he roared hoarsely. "You're crazy! I remember! I know where I am, and how to get back!"

"Take a look around you, Harvey Crane," Dana laughed at him hysterically. "Do you think a world such as this *could ever really exist?*"

"All this, Harvey," she gestured at the chunk of land, the Castle, and the moons—"They're just symbols. This island: your

mind; the world edge is the end of Reality. Out there, the moons—*they are insanity.*"

"But you *wanted* me to stay here. Why did you change your mind?" He stared at her accusingly.

"If you wish, you can ascribe motives to my actions," Dana said tiredly. "But they are your motives, not mine. Harvey, I'm just 'real' in your imagination. In Reality—the only Reality—I'm back on Earth, waiting. Harvey . . . go back. *I want you so!*"

Harvey stared at her, incredulous. "But *you*. Who are *you?*" he blurted.

She bit her lip and gazed at him sadly.

"I," she said, her voice tremulant, "Am your wife."

HARVEY'S memory tore back to a green planet called Earth . . . forgotten faces, places. He *looked* at Dana for the first time, and in that instant of full recognition, she began to dissolve.

"Harvey," she pleaded, "Wake up. You've got to face Reality before it's too late. Please . . ." she sobbed into nonexistence.

Harvey wheeled toward the ship and fled up the ramp. "No!

No! This is Reality!" he shouted. He stared up at the insane island-moons swirling in the sky; the soft, sourceless aqua of the air; the incredible bulk of the Castle on the Edge of Infinity, and he felt on the brink of Hell. Something was going to happen. Harvey's breathing was loud in the thundering silence.

The Castle suddenly wrenched from the island and lifted ponderously into the air, an immense ghastly shadow looming closer. . . . Harvey screamed.

He spun around, intending to use the Matter Disorganizer on the Castle as it swung faster and faster toward the ship. The MD slipped from his grasp and sailed high into the air, toward the . . .

No! No!

Up and up . . .

No! No!

Up and up . . .

No!—

"Please, Harvey . . . *you're trapped in your—in your imagination. You've got to face REALITY.*"

CLANK

It hit the ship.

The Universe dissolved in a vivid flash of white fire, and still Harvey could hear Dana's whispered pleading . . .

THE END

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